

Chapter 99 - The Morning After

Everyone awoke to find the camp had changed. Vexir was snuggling twin driders; two female drow with spider lower halves. An owlbear cub was cuddling her legs and feet. Kaedyn and Astarion were lying on either side of her as if protecting her. Kaedyn was in front of her while Astarion was behind. Wyll was spooning Wynari. Lae'zel and Ryth-Shan were also in one another's arms. Scratch, Shpri, and Zriek were around them, also as if they were protecting. Even Gale and Shadowheart were together. She had her head on his chest.

Shadowheart was the first to speak. She got to her feet almost immediately upon waking and pretty much woke everyone when she announced, "It happened again. Didn't it? Another dream?" She looked around her and saw the look in their eyes. "It was the same for me. Led an army, spilled a world full of blood, all for HIS embrace." She felt a shiver run down her spine. "I still feel the warmth of his touch. I can still hear the screams of those I slaughtered for him." The guilt on her face told the story of what many were feeling.

Then she looked at them each in turn. "Did you want it... what you saw?" She looked almost like a little girl who was frightened of the dark. She was even shaking, just as they had been during the dreams.

"I did," said Kaedyn, admitting his own weakness. "I wanted it all." He met Vexir's gaze, and in that moment, she felt his pain. She knew she had hurt him. She knew he felt betrayed. Behind her, Astarion only grinned wickedly.

"Me too," said Shadowheart. It was clear the guilt was weighing heavily on her. "Whoever's doing this knows me well. Is it really the parasite? It no longer seems like it."

"What appealed to you most?" asked Gale, and when everyone saw her blush they realized that he had been in her dream also. Like them, the Dream Lover wasn't the only person tempting them. "Was it the blood, the power, or the love?" He seemed eager to know how she might feel about him, but he also seemed to want to know simply because he wanted to understand their situation more completely.

Shadowheart shook her head. "All of it," she replied. She seemed to be utterly disgusted with herself.

"Did your visitor ask for anything in return?" asked Wyll.

She shook her head. "Nothing, so far. You?"

"Just to let her in," said Wyll. The others acknowledged that they had experienced the same.

Gale was all-too-serious. "Those visions of yours, Shadowheart, they aren't dreams. They're projections - Illithid ones. Make no mistake. The tadpoles give us the powers to bend others' wills, but using that power clearly comes at a price. Are we willing to pay it?"

Shadowheart held his gaze a bit too long. "Perhaps it's time we stopped indulging in the more useful aspects of these parasites."

"Perhaps it's time indeed," said Gale. "The power to bend wills is a mind flayer specialty." He pronounced it "spesh-ee-ality" and he emphasized it. "We're the ones who are truly at risk."

"Isn't that what I said in the beginning?" asked Lae'zel. "Did I not say we should resist them?"

Wyll laughed. "I noticed you weren't necessarily resisting them yesterday, Lae'zel, just the same as us. We were all using them. Well, most of us anyway."

"Wyll's right," said Kaedyn. "We were desperate in certain situations, and we used them. If we hadn't, we might be dead right now."

"Which is to say," said Vexir, "that we can all agree that we should not use them unless we absolutely have to again to stay alive. It is better to use them and live than to not use them and die. No?"

"Is it?" asked Lae'zel. "Is it really?" She was clearly unhappy with whatever she'd dreamed the previous night. "I died and yet here I am still alive and STILL with the parasite in my head. No. I say it is better to die and be resurrected than to use these powers again."

Wynari then spoke up. "We should stop using the parasites. They can only mean trouble. We've had plenty already."

"Agreed," said Shadowheart. "These dreams are getting more vivid. We need to do what we can to resist them."

“Did anyone resist last night?” asked Ryth-Shan. He wasn’t sure if he had, for his dream hadn’t been similar to Shadowheart’s; or so he thought anyway. His was much more enticing, he thought. Lae’zel was very real, and she had very much tempted him. The thought of running away with her, alone, and becoming a member once more of his own people, and all that came with it - it was almost too much.

Lae’zel met his gaze. “I’m not sure if what I dreamed was a dream or not,” she admitted. “I hadn’t been tempted as they had. Well. I suppose that’s not true. I was tempted with a similar concept. I was tempted by armies slaughtering my enemies. I would be their ruler, and they would bow before me. I would have whatever I wanted; my wildest fantasies come true.”

Ryth-Shan nodded. “I neither agreed to it nor accepted it.”

She understood what he was trying to say and nodded. “To be honest, I didn’t either. I wasn’t sure, if you can believe that.”

“I bit his head off,” said Wynari with a fierce look in her eye. There was something wrong with her. Everyone could immediately tell as soon as she spoke. She was no longer warm and friendly and kind. She was harsh and cold and rigid and almost malicious. “He pulled me in to kiss him, and I turned into a polar bear and crushed his head. I tasted his blood and then plummeted into a dark void where I dwelled in loneliness and emptiness.”

Wyll tried to comfort her by putting his hand on hers. She didn’t resist, but she didn’t seem to welcome it either. He was stunned, also, by the chill on her skin. “Your hand is like ice.”

She looked at him but didn’t even tilt her head in his direction. “The Heart of Auril is still in me, it seems. It is now awake. I doubt any of you will look at me the same again. Be wary. I am no longer your friend. I am neither friend nor foe. I will simply do what I must to ensure my own survival and success. That is the way of Auril. That is the true way of Icewind Dale. That is MY way now.”

Wyll was angry. The others were surprised to see that he cared for Wynari; more than they thought he did. Also, it seemed that something very personal must have transpired between them that night. There was an intimacy that hadn’t been there previously. Well, it was written on Wyll’s face anyway. Wynari didn’t seem affectionate at all. She seemed completely rigid and sterile. She was like an intelligent zombie; animated and moving and articulate but completely devoid of feelings.

“Bull! I don’t believe that for one moment. Don’t you DARE let whatever happened to you last night control you, Wynari. You are stronger than that. You can beat it. You fight it with everything you’ve got, and when you’ve got nothing left, you fight anyway. You hear me? Don’t you dare give up on me.”

Wynari’s expression didn’t change. “If that was true, I’d feel something right now,” she told him. “But I don’t. Besides, one must consider the possibility that our ‘feelings’ and ‘desires’ last night were not our own. We were obviously once again being manipulated by the Absolute, the tadpoles, or whatever the Dream Lover is. Do I truly have feelings for you, Wyll? Was it just what they wanted us to feel? One must truly consider all the possibilities in situations such as these and not simply succumb to appearances.”

“Ask yourselves this question,” Wynari continued. “Did I feel the way I felt last night prior to last night? Did my feelings suddenly change? Was I, previous to setting up camp last night, in love with the person I seemed to be in love with last night; assuming that love had anything to do with it, mind you, since it was more lust than love. The two are different, you know. You can be totally attracted to someone and not care two pennies for them personally.”

Then she studied their faces. “I can see that all of you are concerned for my welfare, but you should not. I am now perfected, actually. Raw emotions do nothing but get in a person’s way. They prevent people from doing what they must do to survive. I can think more clearly, and I am not afraid of anything. Feeling nothing at all has made me stronger and more capable of assisting this party in finding a cure for this affliction.”

“Ironical,” Ryth-Shan replied. He was inspired by Wyll’s remarks. “If you didn’t feel anything at all, then you wouldn’t have warned us about what’s changed within you. It’s a ghastly deception, Wynari. That THING is just convincing you right now to believe its lies. You care about us. Accept that.”

“Ryth-Shan’s right,” said Kaedyn, though everyone could see he was also struggling against what had happened. “We all have to push away what happened last night. We have to not believe what the parasite, or the

Absolute, or whoever it was - we have to not believe what they wanted us to believe. We have to talk ourselves into not believing it, if we have to."

"It WAS trying to convince us that we didn't have the strength to succeed on our own, didn't it?" said Vexir as she stared down at her children. "It wanted me to believe you'd all turn against me."

Then they followed her gaze to the babies playing roughly with one another near her. The twins were playing with the owlbear cub as if they were siblings; as if they'd known each other forever.

"What in all the blazing..." asked Wyll as he took notice of them.

"The eggs hatched," Gale replied on Vexir's behalf. "We now have wee-ones to look out for."

"No we don't," said Wynari. "We have baby monsters to put out of their misery before they become a threat to us." She was just as emotionless as before. Perhaps the Heart of Auril really had frozen over her own heart. Maybe she really couldn't resist it.

Vexir was defensive, but Kaedyn jumped in quickly. "Listen. Doesn't it seem clear what happened last night? The Dream Lovers tried to pit us against one another. They tried to tempt us to rise above one another; to rule over one another. They tried to destroy our trust and faith. We can't let them do that. We need to continue to stand united."

"Must we?" asked Lae'zel. "I wonder if our goals are no longer the same. I, for one, am through with the games we've been playing. I don't believe this Halsin can help us at all. Our only cure is the githyanki creche. You all can waste your time trying to save the druid. I'm going to the creche with Ryth-Shan; if he's coming."

"They tried to kill us all, including you, you dumb githyanki idiot!" Shadowheart snapped. "What do you think they'll do when you waltz right back into their midst at the creche? They'll kill you just as soon as look at you."

Lae'zel snarled. Kaedyn interjected again. "Look! See? This is what the tadpoles WANT us to do. Lae'zel, can you not see it? Can't you see that you should stay with us because the parasites WANT you to go? They can see that we are strong when we're together. We've made it this far. We can only survive this if we don't separate."

Ryth-Shan closed his eyes and sighed. "He's got a point," he said to Lae'zel, but she looked at him as if betrayed.

"So you aren't coming with me?" she asked.

"Can you honestly say that it's wise?" asked Ryth-Shan. "They WANT us to go to the creche, Lae'zel. If our enemy wants us to go to our creche, is it really a good idea to go there? What if they can somehow use us to destroy the whole creche? What then?" She fell silent with a curse.

Vexir then took command of the situation. "Then let us continue with our plans. The tadpoles obviously don't want us to do that. Let's go to the goblin camp and finish what we started. We'll kill the goblin leaders, scatter the rest, and clear the road for the tieflings and other refugees. We'll free Halsin and hope he can actually do something for us. Agreed?"

"I'm with you," said Wyll. "You have my full support."

Kaedyn nodded. "Me too," he forced himself to say. He was still quite angry with Vexir, but he was trying hard to practice what he had just preached.

"I'm in," said Astarion, and Shadowheart and Gale acknowledge their support as well. Finally, Ryth-Shan said he'd join, and Lae'zel agreed rather reluctantly. Only Wynari said nothing. They looked at her curiously.

Her eyes were closed as if she was fighting something internally. When she opened them, a small glimpse of the Wynari they knew peeked out. "I... I will try."

"So what's the plan?" asked Wyll, a bit more encouraged.

"The way I see it," said Kaedyn, "we still have several issues. First, we need to take out the goblin leaders. Without Sazza to give us direct access to the camp, we'll need to do some reconnaissance to figure out the best approach. Besides killing the goblin leaders, we still need to save Halsin. Finally, we need to check Risen Road to see if we can just get out of this region in any direction before the githyanki return in full force. They haven't yet, thankfully, so we may still have time."

“So, I say some of us head to the Risen Road and go east, like we planned to do yesterday,” he continued. “Meanwhile, the second group gathers intel about the goblin camp. Sneak as close as possible and try to gather what information you can.”

“Who is going with whom, then?” asked Gale.

“Only the stealthiest should go towards the camp,” said Kaedyn. “The rest of us should head to the road to check it out. If what the tieflings were saying is true, we’re going to have the potential of gnolls to face there. It may take more of us to survive the road. We have no idea how strong they are and what numbers they have.”

“I’ll lead the group heading towards the camp,” said Astarion. “Ryth-Shan and his animal companions would make great support. Wynari can also change into a beast, so she might be able to get close too. Wyll seems keen on the goblins, and he seems fairly decent with stealth, so maybe he should come as well. What say you?”

“I agree,” said Vexir. She was more than happy to be separated from Astarion for a bit. The dream the previous night had made her uncomfortable around him again. How much of it, after all, had been real? How much of it had been, as Wynari said, HER feelings and desires versus the tadpole’s? How much of it had he shared with her? “I was going to go with you, but now that Sazza is gone, I’ll be useless to you. I’m probably about as stealthy as an elephant herd in this armor.”

“Good,” said Kaedyn, and everyone seemed to agree with the breakout. “Then let’s have some breakfast and get out of here.”

“What about the little ones?” asked Wynari. She didn’t seem to care, but they did notice that it seemed she was forcing herself to. “Have you already forgotten?”

Vexir was beside herself. “I... I don’t know.”

“Should we keep them alive?” asked Lae’zel. “They seem a burden to us. We owe them nothing.”

“I must say,” said Ryth-Shan, “I’m not sure keeping them alive is a good idea.”

Vexir was immediately enraged by them. “I’m not killing them or abandoning them,” she warned.

“Then you come up with a solution,” said Lae’zel.

Vexir scowled in return. She seemed about to lash out at them when Wynari stated, “Ryth-Shan could leave Scratch to watch over them and guard them. They are probably too little at this stage to kill the dog, and he’d likely keep them from escaping the cave here. If he is protecting them, he will probably keep the other druids and tieflings out as well.”

Ryth-Shan nodded. “Zriek will be more of a help to me on this mission anyway. He can scout the camp from above. It’s at least something.”

“See?” said Wyll to Wynari. “You care.”

She shook her head. “I’m merely forcing myself to do what my mind is telling me is caring. My heart feels nothing. We’ll see if the feelings follow my actions, I suppose. It’ll be an interesting experiment if nothing else.”

Wyll frowned. “Well, I certainly hope it works. I’m already missing the old you.”

“That settles things,” Kaedyn said, trying to move past the moment. In his mind, the sooner they got moving, the sooner they could leave behind the dreams of the previous night. “Let’s eat and get out of here.”

Chapter 100 - A Few Last Minute Things

After breakfast, the party set out through the tiefling camp heading for the main entrance to the grove. As they passed Arron, the druid halfling merchant, he flagged them down and asked to speak with them. "Hello again," he said as they circled about his little stand full of bits and bobs.

"What is it?" asked Ryth-Shan, for Arron had waved at him in particular to come over.

Arron's grin was from ear to ear. "Recently, one of the refugees returned here after making an attempt to flee down the Risen Road by himself. I thought you might be interested in what they found." He pulled a half plate of armor out from under a blanket. It was githyanki in make and design. "It looked like one of your kind's pieces, so I thought you might want it."

Ryth-Shan was stunned to see the polished silver glimmering in the light of the early morning with the red gemstones set in it at various places. It was very similar indeed to Lae'zel's. "How much do you want for it?" he asked.

Arron shook his head. "For you and the Faithwarden, it is free. Consider it a gift for all you've done for the grove." Ryth-Shan was quite appreciative of it and accepted it with his gratitude. In turn, he took off his armor and gave it to Arron to sell. He was still getting the better end of the deal, but at least he was doing something to give back to the kind halfling.

Then Arron gestured to another piece he'd just recently acquired. "This came from some sort of treasure hunters who'd been searching that crashed ship south of here," he said. "Their leader was a halfling named Glimmerhock, or something like that. Apparently, they dug up a bunch of loot only to run into ogres near the ruined village. One of our druids was spying on them and witnessed the ambush. The treasure hunters got away, it seems, but they dropped this sword in order to do so. The ogres were too busy chasing the treasure hunters, and they forgot all about the weapon."

The item was a greatsword with a gleaming golden hilt and ruby gemstones on the pommel and hand guard. The blade seemed flawless and glowing with a faint reddish aura. Infernal runes were inscribed on both sides of the blade, and it was smooth and sharp along both edges.

Vexir took to it immediately. "How much?" she asked as she picked it up and examined it like she was a child and it was some new toy.

"Now this one I will sell for a good price," said Arron. "It's a flaming sword."

"I wonder if it belonged to that demon who had been fighting the mind flayer when we were on the command bridge," said Kaedyn after a moment of thought. "He had a flaming sword, and I think he lost it when the dragon attacked."

"I want it," said Vexir. "As much as I love my Blooded Greataxe, a flaming sword is so much more incredible. This may be just what I need right now. It might really tip the scales in our favor."

She then offered her greataxe to Lae'zel who accepted it without question. The githyanki had always liked the greataxe, but she'd settled on her spear since she could throw it and retrieve it. It was a fine ranged weapon for her, but the greataxe would be much better up close and personal.

Ryth-Shan asked her privately why she never demanded that Kaedyn give her the Psionic Greatsword, for it was a weapon of their people, and she told him that she did not wish to wield the blade of such a dishonorable githyanki like Baretha. She wanted nothing to do with any of the githyanki they had encountered that day.

Then they sold some items, including a few revivify scrolls, and a lot of antidotes and potions of lesser restoration. In the end, they had enough to buy it, for Arron even gave them a discount since he was so fond of them.

They were just about to leave when the Four Masks approached. Vengeance, Servitude, Regret and Terror had decided to camp elsewhere in the grove to not only allow the Afflicted their privacy, but they'd wanted their own. They spent a good amount of time comparing notes on what they could remember and on trying to decide what they were going to do with themselves. As they approached, Vengeance, the half-drow, took the lead.

"Morning," she said gruffly. There wasn't much warmth in her voice. However, Ryth-Shan thought he saw appreciation in her eyes.

“Good morning,” Kaedyn replied. “How are all of you this morning?”

“Been better. Been worse,” said Vengeance. “Still don’t remember much about ourselves, but we’re alive and free of the hag. So that’s something.”

“What do you want?” asked Vexir. She came across a bit abrasively, though she didn’t mean to.

Vengeance only glanced in her direction. She seemed to regard Vexir with some mistrust. “We are offering ourselves to your service for everything you did for us. Is there anything you’d like us to do?”

The Afflicted exchanged looks with one another. Then Gale said, “They could stay here and watch over the camp. I’m sure Vexir here would be very grateful if they kept guard over the little ones.”

“I would, actually,” said Vexir. “Yes.”

“Plus,” said Kaedyn, “if there is trouble here at the grove while we’re gone, they might be able to help defend it.” He met Vengeance’s powerful stare. “Would you mind staying here and keeping watch? Our camp is in a cave back along this way.” He pointed back towards the Dragon’s Lair. “We have a couple of, well, interesting new additions to our camp, and having you protecting them would be extremely helpful.”

“They are very important to me,” Vexir said sternly. She wanted to make it clear to them that her babies were to remain unharmed no matter what.

“There are two unique drider - what would you call them - babies I guess,” Kaedyn explained in a quieter voice, “and an owlbear cub.”

This brought on the expected surprised expressions from the four of them. “Driders?” asked Servitude. “As in, there are two little, baby half-drow/ half-spider offspring in your camp? I didn’t think driders could have children.”

“They can’t,” said Vexir. “That’s why he said they were unique. It’s a long story, but essentially they are now my children and under my care. Treat them well or do not agree to protect them at all.”

“We really want to make sure the tieflings and druids stay out of the camp area and don’t even know those children are there,” Ryth-Shan added. “I don’t think it’d go over well, and the tieflings have a bunch of very curious youths in their midst. They formed their own thieves’ guild, and we’re afraid they could go trying to poke their noses into the cave to see what we’ve got. It was their own personal clubhouse before. They might get it into their heads to snoop while they know we’re away.”

“Doesn’t seem like a problem,” said Terror. “If this is what you need us to do, then I think we’re all in agreement that we’re at your service. We’ll head to the cave at once and stand guard.”

“Great!” said Vexir, softening a bit. “There are two entrances to guard, but you’ll have the help of Ryth-Shan’s dog companion, Scratch.”

“I’ll take you back to our camp,” said Ryth-Shan. “That way I can introduce you to Scratch and let him know you’re friends.”

And so he did. Vengeance took up watch at the main entrance. Scratch had the back. Meanwhile, Servitude, Terror and Regret babysat the owlbear cub and drider twins. Then before Ryth-Shan left, he warned, “Oh, and one other thing. There may be a strange undead lich-thing that shows up.”

“Un-dead LICH-thing?” asked Regret. “What do you mean?”

Ryth-Shan winced. “Well, we’re not entirely sure what he is or who he was, but he is something-er-one we met in the crypt south of here. He’s the one who resurrected you.” He gestured to Vengeance.

“Oh,” she replied. “Him. Yes. I remember him. I was wondering about who he was and such. So, he might show up?”

“Yes,” said Ryth-Shan.

“Should we just let him in?” asked Servitude.

Ryth-Shan nodded. “I’m not sure you could stop him. He’s a bit mysterious and powerful.”

“Unless he tries to harm the children,” said Vengeance, “we shall let him do whatever he wants, I guess.”

“Right,” said Ryth-Shan. “Thank you all again. This is actually more helpful than you can imagine. Our companion is - well she - she may be a bit charmed by them, or something. It’s hard to say. She seems to be almost obsessed as if they have a power over her. Best be mindful of that yourselves. Keep an eye on one another just in

case they try to somehow charm you also. I mean, that is to say, I don't REALLY know if they can do that. I just..."

"I think we get it," said Vengeance. "You're suspicious of them, and so we should also be suspicious. Never trust a drow," she added the last part as a joke.

Ryth-Shan recognized it as such. "Exactly," he said with a smile. "Take care." Then he hurried away to catch up to the others.

As he did, Vengeance looked at her companions, then down at the drider twins playing with the owlbear cub. She shook her head. "Who are these people? They certainly do seem messed up."

"They're nice," said Servitude, "but messed up. Yes. I agree."

"We're ones to talk," said Regret. "We were in some hag's lair serving her as her champions, and we can't even remember a thing about who we are or where we came from."

Then a silence fell. The only sounds came from the children. The fact that they couldn't remember who they were weighed heavily upon them. Therefore, with little else to say, Vengeance turned and headed for the main entrance. Then the others went about keeping a close eye on the babies. Each of them was plagued with questions. Who were they? Why had they come to that area? Why had they become the hag's slaves? Would they ever remember who they had once been?

Chapter 101 - Sazza, The Goblin Queen

With that, the party finally made their way out of the grove and headed for the Netherese Rune to teleport to the Blighted Village. From there, they planned to part ways. When they arrived in the ruined town of Moonhaven, however, they were immediately stunned by the smell of a cooking fire and the terrified screams of a goblin female. "Somebody! Anybody! 'ELP!"

In the center of the town near the well, the three ogres had a campfire going, and tethered to a large plank of wood was Sazza. It was clear what they were going to do to her, and she was frantic about it. As soon as she saw Vexir, she made eye contact and cried all the louder. "Boss Lady Number Two! By the Absolute! You've come just in time. 'elp me out 'ere. Ya gotta do somefin 'afore they roast me on a spit!"

The three ogres then noticed the party and grinned. "Just in time for grub," said Lump. "We's was feastin' on chicken yesterday while we's was hidin' from the dragon. Now. Clear skies and no dragon. Our bellies are rumblin' and the she-goblin was still with us. So..."

"Bleedin' fools!" Sazza cried in anger. "Yesterday, I was yer bloody Goblin Queen. I was the one wot told you about the bloody owlbear. An OWLBEAR! I' wasn' a bloody chicken." She looked at Vexir. "They was callin' me their queen an' praisin' me all day long for fillin' their bellies. Now, they're bloody gonna cook me! I'm sorry I abandoned you, Mistress. I' won' 'appen again. Promise!"

Vexir's eyes were wide with delight. She looked at the others. "Sazza never returned to the goblin camp. They were hiding out all day yesterday in the owlbear cave. She can still get us in. This changes everything."

Kaelyn nodded. He was already feeling better. It almost seemed as if the dream had never happened. Everyone was returning to the way they had been before the previous night. "Vexir could now lead the group into the goblin camp while a small group of us checks out the road," he offered.

"I'm still going with her," said Wyll who gestured at Vexir.

"I'll go with you, then," said Ryth-Shan to Kaelyn. "Zriek can then look out for gnolls and warn us ahead of time."

"I'd best go into the goblin camp," said Lae'zel. "My combat skills will be needed, most likely, if we are still going to go through with this."

"I'll go with to the goblin camp, then," said Shadowheart. "They might need a cleric."

"I'll go with Kaelyn," said Gale. "Gnolls are no laughing matter. Get it? Laughing matter? Gnolls?"

Nobody acknowledged his bad joke. "I'm going with Vexir," said Astarion, and Kaelyn stiffened at this. "I'd much rather see what lies in store for us there. The road sounds so dreadfully boring."

Then Wynari summed up who was going with who. "Vexir is taking Lae'zel, Shadowheart, Astarion and Wyll. Kaelyn is taking Ryth-Shan and Gale. It seems clear I should go with Kaelyn, then."

"We'll tell the goblin guards that you're with us," said Vexir. "Once you're done on the road, come to the camp. If we come in two separate groups, we won't draw as much attention to ourselves."

"But then we'll unite to help take out the goblin leaders," said Kaelyn, making sure his voice didn't carry. "All you have to do is hold off until we get there. Then we can fight them as one big team."

"Provided the gith don't find you on the road and kill you first," said Astarion with a grin.

Kaelyn really hated him sometimes, but he chose to ignore him. "Sounds like a solid plan. Good luck to you all. Tyr's blessings be with you. Be careful in there and..."

"Stop worrying," said Vexir. "Just hurry and check out the road and get back here. The sooner you join us, the sooner we can end this."

And with that, Kaelyn and his team hurried north out of town and along the road. Vexir came up to the ogres and Sazza. "This one's with me," said Vexir in her most authoritative voice. "Release her now."

Lump sneered. "We's is hungry now," he told her. "We's is REALLY hungry. You's lied to us. Goblin Queen filled our bellies. Not you. You promised lots of belly-filling. No belly-filling. We's no trusts you no more."

Vexir hardened her expression. "Fool! I thought you were smarter than that."

Lump seemed insulted by this. "I's IS smartestest," he replied. "I's IS Lump, the Lightning One."

“Well, then,” said Vexir. “If that is true, then why are you roasting MY Number One Servant? I am HER Drow Queen, and she serves me. I told her to be your Goblin Queen and to lead you and provide food for your bellies while I was taking care of other business. I TOLD her to take care of you, and this is how you repay me? You decide to roast my most trusted servant?”

“Uh... Well...” Lump said, and his two companions seemed nervous that they’d somehow messed up.

“Enough,” said Vexir. “Get her off of that spit and come with me. Now! I promise you that before the day is over, your bellies will be full indeed. There will be PLENTY of meat for you.”

Lump grinned. “Full?” His companions repeated him.

“Full,” said Vexir. “Possibly for days. I’m planning a great slaughter.”

Lump nodded. “Then you’s now leads us.” And he cut Sazza loose. “Sorry, Goblin Queen.”

Sazza rushed up and threw herself at Vexir’s feet. “Oh, thank you! Thank you! I... I... I promise. You’ll no’ regret this. Come on! Quick! Le’s get back to the camp. I can’t wait to tell the Boss Lady everythin’.”

And with that, Vexir’s party made their way west towards the Ruined Temple of Selune - the Goblin Camp of the Absolute.

Chapter 102 - The Chosen

Both parties were making their way towards their prospective locations when all at once, a disembodied voice spoke to them. "Hear my voice. Obey my command." The voice was irresistible. Every word was drenched with a power and authority that they did not understand, but could not deny. All at once, their visions clouded, leaving them in a dark and featureless shadowscape. Nothingness was in every direction.

Then, there were three figures before them. One was an armored male elf, exuding power and command. A handsome younger man with a quick, easy smile stood next to him. The third was a pale, young woman with even paler eyes.

"These are my Chosen," the disembodied voice said. "They speak for me. Aid their search for the weapon, and you will be worthy to stand beside them in my presence."

Then the visions faded and the voice faltered as a strange energy swelled around the two parties. The many-sided artifact - somehow, they understood it was repelling the presence. It flew out of Shadowheart's magic pocket and floated in the air.

"My power grows. My forces gather," said the disembodied voice. "The reckoning draws near." Then, the voice vanished and the incident was over. The artifact flew back to Shadowheart who quickly thrust it into the pocket.

"You all right?" asked Sazza as she glanced back at them in bewilderment?

"We're fine," said Vexir quickly. She tried to sound sure, but she was obviously not. "Just give us a moment. You and the ogres wait for us by that rickety looking bridge there." She pointed up ahead to a bridge that was, indeed, VERY rickety looking. Made of wood, it looked like it had been rotting out for dozens of years. Some fresh planks of wood did look like they had been attached recently here and there to ensure stability, but Vexir was not confident in the slightest that it could hold them, especially with the ogres.

Sazza grinned. "That's the main way to the camp. As long as the ogres don't try to eat me again, I'll do whatever you ask."

As soon as she and the ogres were beyond earshot, Lae'zel said, "The voice is quelled. The artifact's doing."

"The voice," said Kaedyn as if he was talking directly to Lae'zel. He was on the far side of the ruined village, but they could communicate clearly. "Those visions. What just happened?"

But there was no answer. The artifact was dormant once again. The voice and visions were gone.

They looked at one another as if the answers to their questions were written on their faces. "The Chosen?" asked Wyll. "Weren't WE the Chosen?"

"We were only guessing," said Gale. "We don't know what's really happening around here."

"There were three," said Vexir. "The Dead Three? Do you think they've taken new forms?"

"None of the three Chosen looked anything like the descriptions of Bhaal, Bane and Myrkul," said Kaedyn. "If the Absolute's Chosen are the Dead Three, they certainly took on new forms."

"Seems highly unlikely," said Gale. "The Chosen are probably different beings, then. Perhaps they are merely related to the Dead Three in some way."

"Right. Just because there are three Chosen," said Shadowheart, "that doesn't mean that they are the Dead Three." Then she seemed to consider whether or not to share something with them. Finally, she decided to do so. They had become her friends, after all. "There were several individuals related to Gorion's Ward back over a hundred years ago that could be these Chosen. There was a male elf named Jon Irenicus. However, he was a mage, and the Chosen who was a male elf was wearing armor. Still, you never know. The Chosen male elf could be him. He could have become a powerful fighter mage now."

"Or his skills and abilities could have been reset by a tadpole, like us," suggested Ryth-Shan. "He could simply be a fighter now."

Gale shook his head. "I doubt it. When we were all reset, we remained what we were previously. We just started over. I remained a wizard. You remained a ranger." He gestured to Ryth-Shan. "Shadowheart's still a cleric."

"I suppose. Still, it wouldn't be unheard of for him to become a fighter-wizard," he replied. "If his skills and abilities were reset, he could be anything now."

"The one that triggered the memory for me was actually the pale woman who was a member of the Chosen," Shadowheart continued. "Jon Irenicus' sister, Bodhi, was a vampiress in Athkatla. She would have been pale. Both Irenicus and Bodhi were killed by Gorion's Ward. Irenicus was cast into the Hells. So that would also be a connection."

"What about the third?" asked Wynari. "Who could the handsome younger man with a quick, easy smile be? Any ideas?"

Shadowheart pondered it. "Sarevok Anchev was a Bhaalspawn as well who attempted to kill Gorion's Ward, but he doesn't seem to fit the appearance of that man. I would have expected Sarevok to be much bigger. He was known as a big man and even had glowing yellow eyes."

"There was also a Bhaalspawn named Balthazar, or something like that. I think he was a monk who died at the hands of Gorion's Ward too. He was supposedly the most powerful of the Bhaalspawn next to Gorion's Ward. He was known as one of the Five, a powerful group of Bhaalspawn who were butchering people during that time in the land of Tethyr, I believe. Detesting the evil taint of Bhaal, he went around killing all the other Bhaalspawn in an attempt to purge the lands of evil. His plan was to kill all the others and then himself in the end. I think he had an entire monastery that was under his command."

"I suppose it could BE Gorion's Ward, for all we know. He or she was supposed to be younger in appearance and charismatic. I believe he or she had a sister, too. Imoen was her name. She was a thief and a mage. I don't know. Nothing really fits entirely, and I could be totally mistaken about the other two as well. They don't all have to be connected to the Dead Three, to Bhaal, to Gorion's Ward, or to anyone."

"But three is obviously important," said Vexir. "The Death Three, three Chosen, and there are three main races we've heard about being involved in this area. There is the drow, the goblins and the gnolls. Three races controlled by the Absolute working together here."

"But we know the ghaik are also involved," said Lae'zel. "They are the ones who infect people and make them True Souls, so that is four races."

"Three races who serve the fourth? Three Chosen who serve the Absolute? I don't know. What if the Chosen are gods?" asked Ryth-Shan. "We know Shar's involved. Could she be the woman who is one of the Chosen?"

Shadowheart shook her head. "I highly doubt it."

"No," said Kaedyn. "I agree with Shadowheart there. It seems more to me like the Absolute is looking to become the supreme being of the world; to rob the other gods of their followers. For example, Volo said the goblins had abandoned their god to serve the Absolute. The Dream Lover, whom we are assuming is the Absolute, also seemed to indicate that he/ she was planning on reforming everything. He/ she was going to usher in a new dawn, so to speak. I doubt any gods would agree to join him/ her in that."

"We could honestly speculate all day and never figure it out," said Wynari. "We should keep moving. The longer we wait, the more the Chosen and the Absolute have time to prepare for whatever it is we're going to do."

"She's right," said Wyll. "We've got goblins to kill." And with that, they put all thoughts of the Chosen on the backburner and continued on with their missions.

Chapter 103 - Insatiable Hunger

Kaedyn and his party made their way back to Risen Road. The entire time they maneuvered northward, they kept to the shadows as much as possible and watched the skies. At any moment, they expected to see githyanki, but thankfully none appeared. At the fork, to the left towards Waukeen's Rest, there was no longer smoke rising from the inn. In fact, they couldn't see any sign of the building. It was likely that the whole thing had burned to the ground. All was quiet in that direction. There was no sign of movement.

To the right, the story was different. When they'd first come to the road, there had been pools of blood. The party had been curious about this and had considered investigating. This time, however, it was even worse. There was MORE blood and guts and dead bodies and broken carts and wagons and spilled food and goods and crates and everything one could think of. It was clear what had occurred just that morning before they'd arrived. A caravan had been hit.

For this reason, the party moved carefully eastward. On their right, sheer cliffs fell to another, lower path about thirty feet down and then a mountain river another few feet below that. On the left, paths led up somewhat steep slopes to the feet of high mountain walls. Blood was everywhere in front of them and on the pathways to the left.

Then Zriek dropped and chatted briefly with Ryth-Shan. He sighed and said, "Gnolls. We've found them. There is a heavy gnoll presence very near us, on the left. According to Zriek, the building up the road is a slaughterhouse of dead bodies, limbs, etc. There are a few survivors there, but they don't appear to be in immediate danger. Most have shut themselves up in the toll house. There is a wounded tiefling down the path on the right. She seems to have dragged herself to a little island across the river."

"So, the caravan survivors are up ahead in the building?" asked Kaedyn. "We should hurry to them quickly to see if we can save any."

Ryth-Shan shook his head. "The immediate need is to help those on the left."

"There are survivors on the path to the left?" asked Gale.

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Sounds like they've escaped into a cave north of here and have somehow lit the mouth of the cavern on fire to deter the gnolls from coming through; probably with grease or oil. Zriek counted only two survivors in there, and the entire cave is surrounded by gnolls. They won't last long if we don't help them."

"Zriek can count now?" asked Gale.

Ryth-Shan chuckled lightly. "I told him to squawk once for each person he saw in the cave. He's learning."

Kaedyn looked at everyone with him. "Any objections?" They had none. And so, the party decided to hurry. They hadn't gone far before they encountered a horrific sight. Several hyenas were twitching and convulsing in the road before them. By the time the party spotted them, it was too late. With blood spewing everywhere, with sickening crunches, the beasts transformed into gnolls right before their eyes. They were so stunned by the transformation that they didn't even think to attack until the gnolls spotted them. Then, as they looked at the heroes, they began to drool.

Ryth-Shan was the first to recover from his shock. He fired his bow and hit one of the gnoll witherlings in the head as it came towards them, instantly killing it. But two more were right behind it. They ran up and attacked Kaedyn and Wynari after picking up clubs that were lying in the road. Both tried to bite and then swing, but all they got was Kaedyn's shield and Wynari's staff in their faces.

Then Wynari countered with her new Paleoak staff. She smacked the witherling that had just tried to bite her face off in the right temple. A split second later, Gale finished his Fire Bolt spell, and it shot from his hand and engulfed the creature's face.

Kaedyn then attacked the remaining witherling with his Psionic Greatsword. It was the strongest of them, and his blow only sliced a mean gash in the creature's chest. He wasn't quite able to fell it. Ryth-Shan fired and missed a moment after this. Kaedyn got in his way and he barely avoided shooting his own companion. Then the creature bit Kaedyn on the left arm, but the bite didn't pierce the armor. Furious, it followed up with its club and hit

the cleric of Tyr in the shoulder. He only shrugged it off. The creature was obviously still weak from just transforming into a gnoll. A moment later, Wynari caught it by surprise from behind. She cracked it over the head with Paleoak, killing it.

“Well, that was fun,” said Ryth-Shan. “You okay?” he asked Kaedyn.

“Armor took the brunt of it,” Kaedyn replied, nursing his left arm where the gnoll bit down on him. “I’ll try to suck a little less next time,” he said with a grin. “Come on. Let’s kill the rest of the gnolls before it’s too late.”

And they raced up the hill to the scene. Sure enough, two men were stuck in a massive cave in the side of the mountain, and the only entrance was blocked by a wall of fire. The gnolls had their backs to Kaedyn and his party, and they didn’t notice them coming. They were too busy trying to figure out how they were going to get through the flames.

“If we come in from the east,” Ryth-Shan pointed out, “we will have the high ground and can peg off most of them from above. See the ridge there? There’s a path that leads up to it.”

“I see one or two up there,” said Wynari. “We’ll have to take care of them first, but then the ridge would be ours.”

Kaedyn nodded. “Let’s do it.” Then the party hurried around to the path and came up from behind. There were two gnolls up at the crest, and they noticed the heroes just as they came within about thirty feet of them. Immediately, the two gnoll hunters spun around to confront them. They were the only ones who knew the heroes were there. Therefore, all the others were still preoccupied with trying to figure out how to get into the cave to get the two men.

One of the gnoll hunters fired two shots with its longbow. It aimed for Kaedyn who was at the front. The first shot hit. The second did not. Once again, Kaedyn’s armor protected him. The arrow that hit him in the left shoulder bounced right off. It was painful, but it didn’t break the skin.

Ryth-Shan used Hunter’s Mark and fired his longbow at the other gnoll hunter who was just about to fire with its bow. Ryth-Shan was now faster than he’d been since the crash. During the last few days, some of his old skills were returning to him slowly but surely. One of them was how to load and fire his bow in rapid succession. And so, he was able to get off two shots before the gnoll even fired its first. His initial attack hit, but his second bounced off the creature’s thick hide. He was frustrated. Even the one that hit didn’t do much to slow the beast.

The gnoll pack lord took no notice of what was happening on the ridge. It was too focused on the fresh meat inside the cave. With longbow out, it took aim and fired at one of the two men; the older, light-skinned, blonde male human in red ring mail armor who had taken cover behind some crates. Its shot pegged the crate and missed the man. It fired again with the same result. Another gnoll fired at the same time. It tried to hit the other human male who had darker skin, was younger, and had black, wavy hair. It hit a crate too, and not the true target.

Suddenly, one of the two gnoll hunters came flying off the ridge. As Ryth-Shan was firing at its partner, Kaedyn charged the one who had fired at him. He slammed hard into its chest with his left shoulder as it desperately tried to reload. The monster fell fifty-some feet to the ground below. It landed right in the midst of the gnoll pack. Bones cracked and blood splattered as it cracked its head on the stone, but much to Kaedyn’s surprise, it was still alive. It was severely hurt and prone, but it was moving.

Wynari rushed to the edge of the ridge and cast Entangle on the entire gnoll pack just moments after the falling gnoll drew their attention. Grasping weeds and vines sprouted from the ground in a thirty foot radius, thanks to Paleoak. Each gnoll struggled against being restrained by the entangling plants. Ensnared in her mesh of nature’s tendrils were the pack lord, a flesh gnawer, the gnoll hunter who had just hit the ground, two other standard looking gnolls and a giant hyena. Besides them, there was another giant hyena and flesh gnawer, but they managed to escape. Being free of the vines, they spotted the party on the ridge. And so, they shot off like magic missiles towards the base of the hill. The hyena headed towards the path that sloped up to the ridge while the flesh gnawer went straight for the sheer cliff. It immediately started to climb.

But besides all of these, there was one other gnoll caught in the Entangle spell near the pack lord. She was Flind, a physically enhanced, very powerful looking gnoll female. She had blood red eyes and a black snout that was always snarling and bearing her sharp, yellow teeth. She was easily six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders

and muscular biceps as thick as a body builder's thighs. She had a wiry, golden mane of hair down her back and scars all over including a small one over her left eye. She wore rusty brown, battered up half plate on top with a red scarf around her neck and blue checkered cloth belt around her waist. She also wore red leather leg guards over her thighs and heavy iron boots. The remnants of some sort of gold, decorative plating covered her left shoulder, but the one on the right was obviously broken off ages ago. In her hand she held a wicked looking flail, and on her back was a bow and arrows.

Just as the flesh gnawer and giant hyena who were free darted away, Gale sprang his own little ambush. He'd sent Will-o'-wisp around to sneak up on the gnolls from the ground level. He wanted to use Dragon's Breath to hit them with poison. Thus, as an extension of himself, Will-o' would receive extra power from his new Poisoner's Robes. Will-o' sprang into range just as the gnawer and hyena set off. Gale completed his spell on her, and she sprayed the ensnared pack with poison gas. None died, but they were engulfed by noxious fumes.

Flind was enraged and tried to break the restraints, but she failed and continued to rage. Near her, a giant hyena and one of the regular gnolls also tried to break the restraints but failed. Then the gnoll flesh gnawer, the one ensnared, broke free and ran for the base of the cliff to join its partner in the climb. At the same time, the remaining gnoll hunter drew out its spear and attacked Wynari twice with quick jabs. It was right next to her, and it hoped to break her concentration so she would drop her Entangle spell. Like Ryth-Shan, however, Wynari was regaining some of her skills. She was increasing in combat prowess. Therefore, both times she effortlessly knocked the tip away with a twirl of her staff.

Ryth-Shan reapplied Hunter's Mark, this time to the gnoll hunter. He took two shots and hit both times. He gained a serious advantage over the creature because Wynari was distracting it. Suffice to say, it died with an arrow through its face and out the back of its head and one in its abdomen. It then tumbled off the cliff and smashed into the vines below; vanishing beneath them.

As the pack lord continued to fight to break free of its restraints, and its packmates with it, Kaedyn switched to a crossbow, ran to the edge, and fired at one of the two flesh gnawers. He hit, and though the shot only grazed its left hand, it was enough. The flesh gnawer was hurting from the poison and the vines that had been entangling it, and it lost its grip and fell to join the hunters.

Wynari then used Thorn Whip on the other flesh gnawer. The vine wrapped around its left wrist, and though it didn't do a lot to hurt it, she yanked it up the cliff a good ten feet and then dropped it. This tore it loose from the rock wall, causing it to fall back down twenty feet. It hit the ground hard, cracked its head open and vanished like the others, engulfed in vines.

Will-o' then used Dragon's Breath again on the pack. The pack lord choked and sputtered and continued to fight the vines. Gale was pleased to detect that both of the typical gnolls died as they gasped for air and finally gave up. Flind survived, as did one of the giant hyenas, but they were definitely not doing well.

As his familiar was taking care of this, he noticed the other giant hyena coming up from behind. And so, he used the Poison Spray spell on it. Unfortunately, he saw that the creature shrugged off the attack and continued on towards him. Therefore, he quickly joined his companions, deciding to not be the closest to their attacker. Ryth-Shan spun around as Gale came up beside him. He reapplied Hunter's Mark on the new foe and fired. His arrow plunked into the ground near the creature's feet, and he quickly drew out another and took a second shot. Too fast. He barely missed.

Kaedyn also took notice and charged. As the two came within attack range of each other, he swung his sword hard and hacked a sizable patch of its skin right off the left side. Wynari joined him and attacked the creature on its right. She struck it as hard as she could on the shoulder, but her aim was off. The hyena saw her as the weakest opponent and tried to kill her first, but she fell back a pace at the last second and batted its snout away.

Will-o' then pummeled the gnoll pack yet again with Poison Breath. Still, the pack lord and Flind didn't die. Neither did the other giant hyena. At the same time, Gale cast Poison Spray on the hyena he and the others were facing. This time it took the full blast of toxic goo to the face. It was still standing, but the spell had greatly weakened it. Ryth-Shan fired and missed with his first shot, but at last his second shot connected. His hunt was completed. It died with an arrow to the head.

Kaedyn saw the monster die and immediately returned to the ridge. Pulling out his crossbow, he carefully aimed and fired at the pack lord. It was still stuck in the vines. No matter how hard it had tried, it simply could not break free. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. A moment after his bolt sailed through the air, blood spurted out of the monster's head.

There was little Wynari could do, then. She had no ranged weapon. Therefore, she simply strode towards the edge of the ridge as if she had the entire situation under control. She knew it was only a matter of time before the gnolls were all dead. The battle was already won. She didn't need to hurry. She had no fears at all. Calmly, she came to the edge to watch as the remainder of her enemies perished.

Will-o' spat poison again. The giant hyena died. All that remained was Flind. Gale rushed to the edge and was about to attack when, suddenly, the creature looked up at them and piercing ice shards assaulted their minds. They saw themselves through her eyes. To her, they were nothing but pulsing red clusters of organs. FEAST! No... The Voice had forbidden this meat. As the symbol glowed before their eyes, power coursed through them. Authority.

Kaedyn did not resist. He saw an opening in Flind's mind and he searched it for the source of the Voice. He wanted to know anything he could glean from her about the Absolute. There was a memory; the beast daubed the symbol of the Absolute on a cave wall in blood. Buried deep, a tadpole struggled to assert control against the ravenous chaos of her mind.

Kaedyn focused on the tadpole. How did it come to be there? Then he saw drow and goblins restraining her... a mind flayer reaching out... and then the Voice, bringing order: eating this meat was forbidden, but it would lead her to a feast. She wanted meat. She had an insatiable hunger, and the only cure for it was devouring flesh.

Kaedyn found himself commanding her to feed on her own kind. Then, sensing his presence, the gnoll's tadpole writhed in ecstasy, echoing his commands and desires. Its host would feast on gnoll-flesh to control the hunger; to keep her teeth from their throats and the throats of other people on the road. She would return to her own tribe and tear them apart. She would die trying to feed on them all if she had to. A shiver ran across Kaedyn's mind... he felt sated.

Wynari lost concentration because of the incident. Flind was free. They were all too stunned. Before they could do anything further, Flind fled. They didn't pursue. They knew where she was going. She was going to find the rest of her tribe. Some of them were not far away, just east along the road beyond the mountain pass. She would feast on her own kind until there were none left; if they didn't kill her first. Either way, that would be the end of the gnoll presence on Risen Road. Whether she killed them all or not, the Absolute's use for the gnolls was over.

Kaedyn grit his teeth and cursed himself for his own weakness. "By Iltyr!" Iltyr was Tyr's Blind but All-Seeing Eye. "I used the tadpole's power again." Then he cursed himself several more times just for good measure.

Ryth-Shan rested a hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy, Kaedyn. Remember, you are battling ghaik mind control. This is no mere parasite of theirs either. We'll best it next time."

Kaedyn was not relenting, however. "I'm just so sick of the Dream Lover and the whole \$#@ thing! I really wanted to make sure I didn't lose control today. I wanted today to be the first day that we beat it."

For the first time since they'd known him, Kaedyn had truly lost it. To know that he was so frustrated with his own weakness, the others felt better. It strengthened them. They wanted to be stronger for him, if nothing else.

Wynari even managed to feel a hint of her former self return. "The day has only begun," she said softly. "The day's battle has only just started. She may have won this round, but there will be many more. Don't beat yourself up, Kaedyn. Just prepare yourselves for the next attack. She'll come again soon. She always comes at times when we are most stressed and vulnerable. The next fight we are in, or the next emotionally charged situation, remind yourself at once to watch for it. Then, maybe, we might just beat it."

This brought a silence to the group as they pondered her words. Then, all of a sudden, they were interrupted by a voice calling to them from below. "Hey! Hey up there!" It was the blonde man from the cave. He was waving to them to get their attention. "Just out of curiosity, would you be friend or foe? I'd really like to know so I can prepare myself ahead of time if you're foe." He grinned as if he'd just told a funny joke. "Thanks for taking care of the gnolls, by the way. By the gods, you're a sweet sight. Are any of my crew still alive out there?"

“No,” said Kaedyn. “It’s a grim sight.”

“This whole journey’s been one grim sight after another,” said the man. “Gnolls, goblins... Drow. Risen Road’s more dangerous than ever. You’re the first friendly face we’ve seen since Elturgard.”

“Elturgard’s a long way from here,” said Kaedyn. “Where are you heading?”

“We’re bound for Baldur’s Gate. Where else?” said the man. “Got some cargo to deliver, but we’ve a stop to make along the way.”

“Maybe we should come; see you don’t get waylaid again,” Kaedyn offered. He was somewhat hoping that the man knew of a secret way they could take to get to the city.

“Thanks. But that won’t be necessary,” the man replied. “We’ll find help at Waukeen’s Rest.” Then he paused for a moment in thought. Kaedyn and the others were about to tell him about Waukeen’s Rest, but he cut them off. “Listen. You look like you know how to handle yourself. You should meet my associates. We’ve got our own drinking spot by the tavern. Invitation only. Tell the fellow at the door ‘little serpent, long shadow.’ He’ll take good care of you.”

“Waukeen’s Rest is burned down,” Kaedyn informed him sadly.

“What? Really?” the man replied, quite disturbed by the news. “What about the back stables area? Is it still standing? And the storehouse? What about the storehouse?”

Kaedyn considered that for a moment. The fires seemed to be contained to the main building. They might not have spread to the stables and storehouse. Then he remembered the wizard who had tried to kill them. He had fled into the cellar, and they had let him go. That was when he realized what the situation actually was.

“You’re illegal traders, aren’t you?” he asked before really considering whether it was wise or not.

The man went rigid, but he maintained his smile. “I prefer to call it entrepreneuring, Friend. We’re trying to keep our trade lines open and healthy here. You aren’t Flaming Fist, are you?”

Kaedyn shook his head. “No. We’re just passing through this land.” Then he noticed the other man carrying a single chest out of the cave. It seemed to be extremely heavy, but it seemed he was not willing to leave it alone even for a second. He set it down near the first man. “What’s in the chest? Your special cargo?” Kaedyn inquired.

The blonde man seemed even more nervous. “Aye. The whole reason we’re in this mess. Trinkets for some rich tosser in Baldur’s Gate. He gets his shiny baubles, we get a handful of Tarenths.”

Gale replied, “Tarenths? That’s Zhentarim currency. You’re Zhentarim. Your people don’t deal in ‘baubles.’ What’s really in the chest?”

The man’s smile vanished. “You know who we are. Very clever. Slip of the tongue. Then you probably also know it’s not smart to interfere with Zhent business. This is the point when a clever lad like you accepts my gratitude and walks away. Come on Olly. Let’s get moving.

“Right, Rugan,” the younger man replied nervously.

“Keep anything else you find in the cave or on the road,” said the blonde man named Rugan. “All we care about is this chest. Good luck to you and yours, and if you are friends of ours, remember the code phrase I gave you. Use it at the storehouse at Waukeen’s Rest. ‘Little serpent, long shadow.’ Stop by, and our leader there might just give you a tidy reward for saving us. She might also have some work for you to do, if you’re interested.” Then the two hurried off with the chest between them, half-jogging towards Risen Road as they watched the countryside around them for more signs of gnoll activity.

Kaedyn looked at the others. “Shall we?” Then he gestured off towards the building Zriek had told them about. They could see it off to the east now that they were on the ridge. It wasn’t too far up the road. And with that, the party left the cave behind. After finishing their quest and checking out the safety of the road beyond, they thought they might return there and see if they could find anything useful. For now, however, they wanted to check out the building just to make sure everyone there was okay.

Chapter 104 - Fiend or Foe

The sight at the building was worse than the road. The viscera was everywhere. There were bodies and limbs and so forth of gnolls as well as humans, elves, dwarves, and the like. Blood and guts and carnage was scattered throughout. It was the scene of some horror story; as if some vicious psychopath had gone on a killing spree, butchering countless young people who were fleeing for their lives.

A lone dwarf walked amongst the filth. He was picking his way along as if searching for survivors. Kaedyn and his companions rushed over to him, but they kept their weapons ready just in case. The dwarf had dark brown hair, brown eyes, a trimmed beard and a blue shirt and brown slacks. He seemed relatively harmless except that he carried two daggers, one at each hip, and he was covered in blood from head to toe.

“Greetings, Friends! Name’s Rurik. Welcome to Risen Road toll house. You won’t get any further this way, just so you know. Road’s blocked up ahead.” He jabbed a thumb down the road to a mountain pass. It was completely devastated. There were boulders and carts and wagons and dead bodies all blocking the way. Someone had obviously created an explosion powerful enough to bring the mountains down onto the road on both sides. It would take forever to try to climb over.

And yet, as they examined the scene, Wynari spotted Flind picking her way over the entire mess. She was obviously an adept climber, for she was scaling it effortlessly. Her hunger was driving her swiftly along. As the others continued their conversation, Wynari and Zriek couldn’t help but watch in quiet fascination as the gnoll True Soul seemed to crawl like a spider vertically up and over.

Kaedyn’s heart sank, but something inside him knew already that they weren’t going to be able to escape to the east. “Thanks for letting me know. What caused the blockage?”

“Rockfall in the ravine. Perfect spot for an ambush,” said Rurik. “We barely made it through along with this caravan. Gnolls jumped us shortly after.”

“Are the dead gnolls your handiwork?” Ryth-Shan asked.

The dwarf smiled proudly. “I killed the biggest, ugliest one myself. My friends inside took care of the rest. Well, a few went off after the caravan. There wasn’t much we could do for them. By the time we finished up here... well... we hadn’t had time to check it out. We’ve been trying to figure out how many dead we already have here and see if there are any wounded we can heal.”

“Anything we can do to help?” asked Kaedyn.

“Looks like no one’s alive out here. Best talk to Anders inside,” said the dwarf. “He’ll be the Tyrite paladin with the greatsword. I’ll finish up out here if you want to go ahead. I’m pretty sure no one else is living, but you never know.”

Kaedyn nodded. Then they went into the building. It was a mess. There were things strewn about everywhere. It was obvious there had been a raid of some kind. Furniture was overturned, cabinets and drawers were thrown open, crates busted or looted, debris, mostly papers, were strewn everywhere, and there were lots of scuff marks and blood on the floors and walls. Most looked days old.

The building was two stories tall, but the upper level was really only a partial floor on the east side with a ladder on the north side of the building that allowed access. This walkway was only about four feet wide and it ran along the east side to the south where there was another entrance out onto an open veranda which commanded an excellent view of the landscape to the south.

It was easy to tell who Anders was. He was a tall human male with blonde hair and blue eyes. His smile was kind and warm. He wore masterwork scale mail and a big, gleaming greatsword on his back with a brown hilt that had a golden pommel and handguard. The blade itself glowed with a faint golden aura, and it had many runes etched into it on either side. The symbol of Tyr was engraved into the center of the hand guard on both sides. There could be no doubt, it was a holy weapon of Kaedyn’s god.

With him was a halfling female with a bow, bloody commoner clothes, blonde hair and a gruff look on her face. She was crouching by a trap door just south of the main entrance, and it seemed she was listening for sounds. In a side room, a storage room to the south, there was a human female with light brown hair and blue wizard robes.

She carried a quarterstaff in a sling on her back. Unlike the halfling, the human female seemed friendlier and more soft hearted. She was opening and closing cabinets and such as if in search of something important.

When the party entered, the man named Anders greeted them. "At ease, Friends. The gnolls hit us hard, but this place is still safe. It's under Tyr's protection."

Kaedyn knew he should feel at ease, what with the man being a Tyrite and all, but after his own past experiences, he had learned that just because someone claimed they were a Tyrite, it didn't mean that they actually put his tenants into practice. "Bless you. I'm a cleric of Tyr's church," he replied guardedly. Everyone in the party noticed that he kept his greatsword out, and they kept their weapons at the ready as well.

"What fortune," said Anders with an even friendlier smile. "Tyr himself must have sent you to assist us. We are paladins in his service."

This immediately threw up red flags for Kaedyn. None of them looked like paladins except Anders, but he had included them all in his statement. It could have been a mistake, he realized, but something in his gut told him that it wasn't. It was a direct lie. Tyr hated lies. That was the realm of Cyric. Lies subverted justice. A true paladin of Tyr would not need to lie. He was hiding something. Kaedyn could even see it in his eyes.

He decided to call him on it to see how he would respond. "Drop the charade. You don't serve Tyr. Who are you really?" It was a bold proclamation, but he knew that sometimes you had to accuse people of things just to see how they might respond. Their responses often told a person the truth.

The halfling immediately drew her bow and took cover. "Block the doors," she called towards the dwarf outside.

Anders immediately held out his hand towards her. "No, Trynn. We're not murderers." He seemed to want to diffuse the situation, if he could. That was a step in the right direction. Maybe they weren't ALL bad. "I'm sorry we deceived you. I did follow Tyr once, but I broke my oath when I saw how blind his justice can be. Goblins slaughtered my children while I was fighting other people's battles. Was that justice?" There was genuine pain in his eyes. It softened Kaedyn's approach slightly.

"It doesn't seem like justice," he said in reply. "I'm sorry you suffered. Sometimes it is difficult to understand why bad things happen to good people."

"I don't need your pity," said Anders, a bit more harshly than he meant to. "I serve a simpler master now, an archdevil Zariel. She gives me the power to protect those I love, and the price I must pay is clear."

This took everyone by surprise. "Zariel? You serve a devil now?" asked Gale. "From divine Great God of Good to Evil Mistress of the Hells, that's a pretty significant leap."

"Isn't that the same archdevil the demons on the nautiloid served?" asked Ryth-Shan through their mental link. He did not speak it aloud. "Remember the commander's words when he was battling the mind flayer. 'For Zariel! This ship is mine!'" The memory returned to Kaedyn, Vexir, and Lae'zel as well.

"Glad I'm not there," Vexir remarked as she hefted the flaming greatsword, Everburn.

"And what is the price you have to pay?" Kaedyn asked Anders, once more completely on guard. He was ready for the so-called paladin to strike.

"A soul," Anders replied, but he showed no remorse for this. "Either my own, or that of a creature bound to her that escaped Avernus. She has the form of a tiefling, with a single horn, but she's an infernal being, straight out of the Nine Hells." This last part he seemed to say with extreme hatred. "Some of the massacre around us was done by her. We were chasing her and caught up with her here. She was... She was already slaughtering everyone. She was cutting them to ribbons." He seemed rather choked up about it.

"We would have ended her if not for the gnolls. They attacked that caravan just moments after we cornered her. The blast... well... it gave her the break she needed to run for it. The next thing we knew, the gnolls were attacking all those people in the caravan and..."

"You'd damn another soul to save your own?" Kaedyn asked, wanting to hear more about the devil. He was still trying to determine if he trusted the man or not. Things were still not adding up.

"Her soul's already damned," Anders told him callously. "She escaped from the Hells. We just need to send her back. Besides, she's slaughtered countless refugees. Yesterday, she butchered an entire family... the mother had been pregnant. That was just east along the road before we chased her here this morning."

Kaedyn didn't believe him; not even for a moment. Maybe it was that he had grown up with Tyrite liars and hypocrites, so he didn't want to trust the man. More likely, it was that his story didn't make sense. Why did the others with him sell their souls to Zariel? They certainly weren't Tyrites. Who were they really? Why were they following Anders? Even the family being butchered and the mother being pregnant, there was something about the story that seemed off. It all seemed fabricated. Yes, he was trying too hard to convince them that he was a good man; a good man who served an archdevil of the Hells.

"I'm done with this," said Kaedyn heatedly. "You're on your own." This surprised everyone else in his party. The entire encounter had shaken them up. They thought they knew Kaedyn; that he was willing to help anyone with just about anything. Here was a Kaedyn that was quite hostile towards a so-called Tyrite, of all people.

Anders remained friendly, in spite of Kaedyn's response. "I understand. But if you see the fiend, be on your guard. She's dangerous."

"Right," said Kaedyn. "Is there anything else around here we can do to help? Are there any survivors needing healing?"

Anders shook his head. Trynn, the halfling, gestured to a hatch. "Haven't been down there yet," she said, her hard expression remaining on her face. "Feel free to check it out, if you want. The stench is awful, so I've avoided it. I doubt anything's alive down there."

Kaedyn glanced at the others. He didn't need to ask. They all nodded their approval. And so, they went into the cellar. It was filled with many crates and shelving units that used to be full of odds and ends. It looked like the rest of the tollhouse with useless items scattered everywhere.

They found a rotting corpse, the source of the smell, almost immediately and a ledger under a shelving unit that explained a few things about the building and what had happened to it. It contained details of the toll house's takings for the current year; 1492 DR. Most entries were neatly written, listing the travellers and the amount of gold paid, but the text on the most recent page was smudged and rambling.

"9 Marpenoth," Kaedyn read, "four merchants, with single wagon of sundries - 25 gold. 12 Marpenoth: Flaming Fist Company, fifteen Fists and Gauntlet - 100 gold fee waived. Fist don't pay tolls, they extort. 21 Marpenoth: brewer and two guards, bringing kegs to Waukeen's Rest - 35 gold. 2 Uktar: seven farmers, no goods, no gold. Wounded. Warned us to leave. 3. Uktar: sent courier to request extra guards or relief. 7 Uktar: more farmers, too many to count. no goods. carrying their own dead. 11 Uktar: road untenable. 16 Uktar: preparing to abandon post."

"We could get the amulet to talk to the dead from Astarion," suggested Gale. "Maybe his corpse could tell us more."

"I'm not a big fan of necromancy," said Kaedyn, "but if you want to, feel free."

"Let's not," said Wynari. "Aren't we trying to avoid using the tadpoles? Let's start fighting even communicating with one another via thoughts. Think about it. Isn't that what mind flayers do? They are a collective. We are turning into a collective. Anything that connects us as a collective leads us one step closer to becoming one. Right?"

Ryth-Shan couldn't help but wholeheartedly agree. "It's probably not worth it anyway. It's clear what happened here. The Absolute's minions have been at work in the area. Farmers were getting killed. People on the roads were dying." Then he gestured to the man's wounds. "A jagged goblin spear made that. The toll house was attacked by goblins. Since we didn't see many bodies of guards or other workers, my guess is this guy was abandoned. He tried to flee into the basement, but the goblins caught him and ran him through. Locked bars would have deterred the goblins from stealing everything beyond."

He gestured to the only doorway in the room. It was like a cell door made of iron bars. They could see through to the chamber beyond. Many more crates and vases and barrels and shelves riddled that room. Off to the left was yet another chamber beyond another door made of iron bars. It looked to be larger but similarly full of storage.

"You know," said Kaedyn, "it always amazes me how you are able to deduce those kinds of things. Now tell me if you think the Tyrite up there and his followers are good or bad."

Ryth-Shan chuckled. "That's your area of expertise; not mine."

Kaedyn stared at the dead man. “The log says 16 Uktar. That’s over a week ago. The corpse smells pretty bad. The blood stains are old. And yet, Anders said they’d just gotten here and the devil they are hunting had slaughtered people here. But this man was abandoned, and there weren’t any bodies of guards around. There were only caravan people, and he said that she was killing people, the caravan showed up, and then the gnolls attacked. So, who was she killing when they got here and cornered her? It’s not looking good.”

Then they began to search the rest of the toll house. After finding a master key under a shelf near where the toll house keeper had obviously dropped it while trying to get into the room beyond, they were able to get the barred door open. They milled about the two storage rooms, found a few valuable things, and paused when they saw a blank wall with a stone chair on either side. Wynari and Ryth-Shan spotted a secret door with a mechanism to unlock it being that two people had to sit in the chairs at the same time; one in each. As long as they continued sitting in them, the wall descended into a groove via a noisy contraption.

They also found traps, but Ryth-Shan was certain that the traps would only be sprung should someone attempt to pick the lock on the doors. A person with the key wouldn’t set them off. Vents in the floor would emit poisonous gases that would likely just render everyone unconscious and sound some sort of alarm. Since they had found the key, they didn’t have to worry about it.

Inside the secret room was a treasure trove of weapons and equipment along with lots of gold. The adventurers were able to stock up on plenty of arrows and other resources including more healing potions, speed potions, and the like. “This will definitely come in handy later,” said Gale. “I say we return these to camp before we make our way to the goblin camp later. Well, that is, all the extra weaponry. We’ll keep the potions and such with us, naturally.”

The most important items they found were several suits of plate armor. One was rather polished and shiny. A note on it stated that it was not to be touched by anyone at the toll house. It was being reserved for someone named Lieutenant Merin who would be arriving shortly from Baldur’s Gate. Apparently, they had recently lost their previous captain, and they were preparing the man’s suit for his successor. Lieutenant Merin was receiving a promotion to captain. It was designed just like the Flaming Fist Gauntlet’s armor that they had met at Waukeen’s Rest.

“You should take that,” said Ryth-Shan. “You are our healer and you provide us with blessings and aid during battle. It is important for you to be well-protected.”

Kaedyn wanted to give it to Vexir, but he decided Ryth-Shan’s suggestion was wiser. He could always cast Shield of Faith on others to enhance their defense. However, that required his concentration, and if he suffered injury, he might lose his concentration. Thus, his ability to keep enhancing others’ abilities would be lost. And so, he donned the armor.

“We’ll have to paint over it,” said Gale with a smile. “The Flaming Fist might not like you wearing a Fist Captain’s armor.”

As Kaedyn put on the captain’s armor, the others began to stuff the rest of the armor and weapons into the magic pockets inventory. As they did, Lae’zel seemed to somehow know that better armor was within easy reach. The tadpole! Whether they meant to or not, they still communicated what they were doing to the others. Other suits of plate armor were now within easy reach. They were too heavy for Vexir to use well, but Lae’zel was not so encumbered by them. She also recognized that a full suit of plate was better than her githyanki half plate. Deciding that efficiency in battle was better than her pride in this case, she chose to pull one of the Flaming Fist suits out of the magic pockets and put it on as she and her companions continued through the goblin camp.

Sure, it had the Flaming Fist insignia on it with all of its colors, but as she put it on amidst all the goblins watching, she took a dagger and scraped crisscrossing lines through the symbols. Everyone watching recognized what she was doing, and they approved. She made it clear that the armor was from the spoils of battle, and she was dishonoring the emblem.

Wynari and Shadowheart also gained new armor and donned them. Like Vexir, they couldn’t wear full plate suits, but they could wear half plates. They didn’t dare touch Lae’zel’s, nor did they want to, and so they changed into half plates found in the hidden cache. Like Lae’zel’s and Kaedyn’s armors, they had the Flaming Fist insignia and colors, but Shadowheart followed Lae’zel’s example and proceeded to put scratches in it.

Astarion gained a suit of studded leather, finally getting rid of his custom padded armor that he'd had originally. He was glad to be rid of it and even chucked it to the side of the path they were on at the time. Anything to get rid of his past life was welcoming to him. The armor reminded him too much of Cazador, he commented. His new armor, too, had the Fist symbol in the form of patches on the breast and shoulders, and he used his dagger to cut them off.

Finally, Kaedyn's group left the toll house basement. As they ascended, Trynn eyed them suspiciously. Anders smiled, but Kaedyn felt as if it was fake. The group then hurried out the front door and took a quick look around for clues. Kaedyn wanted to see if there was anything additional that might help them determine the truth about the Tyrite and the devil woman they hunted.

Ryth-Shan was the one to piece things together. As they wandered around the toll house, they found dead human remains. "This is not the work of gnolls," he said as they stood in a little nook behind the building on the east side. Severed limbs were everywhere. Someone's bloody handprint was on the wall. It was clear a person had fallen against it and had slid to the ground. "Someone chopped these people to pieces. This was the work of a sadistic maniac. If it had been gnolls, the meat would have been eaten or at least bitten into. No. These were cut with blades and skinned. This was recent too."

Kaedyn was sick to his stomach and barely keeping breakfast down. Flies were everywhere, and the stench was worse than the basement. "Do you think THEY did this?" he asked, indicating in Ander's direction through the outer wall of the building.

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Could be the devil they spoke of," he thought aloud, "but why skin them? That takes a lot of work and time. Whoever did this has been here I'd say maybe a few hours; a day at most. This was not a sudden, recent attack, nor did it happen a week or more ago, like the toll house keeper. So, it wasn't the caravan that we see sprawled out everywhere. That does seem more recent. The blood from them is very fresh. The dead gnolls in the road are recent too."

"No. I think that part of the story checks out. Whoever killed these humans was here before the gnolls and caravan arrived. They butchered them and THEN the caravan and gnolls showed up. I think they toyed with their victims, abused them, brought them back here, and chopped them to pieces while they were still alive."

"Who were these people, then; the victims?" asked Wynari. "The toll house was abandoned. Only the toll house keeper was here. Right? He died over a week ago."

"Other refugees, is my guess," said Ryth-Shan. "I'm wondering if those supposed Tyrites took over this toll house and maybe they ensnared a group of refugees as they made their way through here hours ago."

"But why?" asked Kaedyn, his blood boiling with rage.

"Sick, twisted ritual of some kind, maybe?" suggested Gale. "I mean, it seems pretty clear to me that it must be them. The work seems to be the same throughout. The same killers who butchered these people killed those gnolls too. Same style. Same methods."

"Then it WAS them," Wynari replied in low tones.

"Most likely," said Ryth-Shan. "They admitted to killing the gnolls. The dwarf was even excited that he'd felled the biggest himself. He doesn't look like much of a fighter, and he has no armor. So, how did he fell the biggest gnoll in the pack? He must have secret powers given to him by the devil."

"The entire group has way too much strength and power for what they are wearing and carrying," said Gale. "He's right. They definitely seem like the guilty party."

"Do we just go in there and confront them?" asked Wynari.

"Zriek said there was an injured tiefling down on an island across the river not far from here," Kaedyn said, remembering the report. "She is probably the one they're looking for."

"If she's that close," said Gale, "why haven't they gone after her?"

"They were just attacked by gnolls," suggested Kaedyn. "If they were butchering people here, and then they fought the tiefling, and then the caravan and gnolls showed up, they probably just haven't gotten to chasing her yet. We may have shown up before they got the chance. Let's go visit her and see what she has to say about all this. I'd like to hear her side of the story before we make a final decision about all this."

“Keeping in mind, of course,” said Gale, “that she MAY still be the devil they say she is. SHE may have been the one who did all this.”

Chapter 105 - Karlach, The Demon Slayer

They agreed and hurried down the trail to look into the situation. Arriving at the spot, they were immediately greeted with a crossbow aiming at them from within the bushes. “Hold up,” came the angry voice of a strong female with a broken right horn and no hair on her head. She had a jagged scar on her right cheek and additional scarring on her scalp as if she’d suffered some burns on that side. Her left horn was like a ram’s horn, and it curled outward to a point just above her broad shoulder. She had pale skin and fiery orange eyes with strong facial features and overall build.

As for her gear, she wore a custom suit of plate armor with Zariel’s symbol on it dead center on the breastplate. It had the appearance of silver and gold flames intertwined across her chest and spreading to her shoulders with the gold being the primary color of the breastplate and silver becoming primary throughout the remainder of the suit. Besides this, she had a longsword at her left hip, and a heavy crossbow in both hands. A spear was lying next to her as well.

“One more step, and I put a bolt through your eye. No sudden movements, or you’re dead. You looking for me?”

Kaedyn turned to his companions. “A vicious murderer like what we saw up there doesn’t warn you to not come any closer.” He turned to face her again. “No, but I see you’re hurt. Let me help.”

“Hurt or not, I won’t miss,” the tiefling warned once more. “Lung, heart, \$#@ or eye. Take your pick. Tell me what you’re doing here. Now.”

“I just want to know what’s going on here. I swear,” Kaedyn told her.

“All right,” she said, lowering the crossbow only a little. “Maybe the blood-loss is making me soft, but I’m going to trust you... for now. I’m in a tight spot. Might not be able to get out of it alone.”

“Maybe I can help. Fill me in,” said Kaedyn.

“All right. Come on over here. But fair warning. You might find this hard to believe.” Then she allowed Kaedyn to jump over to her little island in between two branches of the river. The others didn’t dare join him. They remained poised and ready, though, just in case.

When he came within about ten feet of her, she said, “My name’s Karlach. I’m a fugitive. I escaped the Hells, and the bastards who were holding me there are trying to take me back.”

“You were in Hell? So was I, not long ago,” said Kaedyn.

“Really? You’re serious?” said Karlach. She seemed genuinely stunned. Kaedyn wasn’t sure, though, if it was, in fact, genuine.

Then, much to their surprise, she winced from pain... and they all felt it. As agony shot through her, it shot through them, as if their bodies shared the same wound. Then, they were lost in visions of demonic armies, as they tore through a landscape of fire and blood. The Blood War. They saw it from above as the nautiloid passed through Avernus. This woman was on the frontline.

Karlach swore. “Ster’ca! What was that? You were inside my head...”

“It wasn’t me,” Kaedyn explained. The resentment he was feeling towards the tadpole returned in full force. “It’s the parasites from the mind flayer ship. They connected us.”

“Hold on a minute. You were on that ship? With the tentacles and the worms? I didn’t think anyone else had survived,” said Karlach. She was quite relieved to hear this, it seemed.

“I didn’t see you aboard. Where were you?” asked Kaedyn. He still wasn’t sure about her, but the fact that she was one of them put him more at ease and made him believe her more than the Tyrite and his minions.

“I boarded in Avernus. That ship was my way out,” Karlach told him.

“How’d you get infected with the parasite?” asked Kaedyn. “They must have captured you and infected you pretty quickly, since we weren’t in Avernus long.”

Her eyes narrowed. She seemed bitter about it. “Oh, they captured me, all right. Back at that time, I had wings. I flew up onto the ship thinking I was going to just board and hide. Right into a stinking nest of the buggers. After everything I’d been through, the tenties just waved their hands at me and I was stuck fast. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t do anything. It was like I was nothing to them. Demons and imps were flying all around with dragons and

such, and they just zapped my brain and made me follow them. Then they put one of those things in my eye and released me. It all happened so fast that I barely knew what happened. It was as if they just did it on the fly. It wasn't planned. They just saw me, snatched me, infected me and tossed me aside to deal with the invaders. Why me? Why not any of the other \$#@ \$ boarding? Then, in my mind, this voice told me to be ready. Ready? Ready for what? I don't know."

"You must have gotten clear of the crash site in a hurry," Kaedyn replied. He was baiting her in hopes she might accidentally slip up.

"You're lucky I did," she said with a laugh. "The place would have been crawling with cultists if I'd stuck around, and they'd have dragged us all back to Avernus."

"So, you escaped and they chased you? What makes you so important to them?" Kaedyn asked.

"I was a prisoner, forced to fight in the Blood War; the eternal battle between bad and worse," Karlach explained. "Most souls in Avernus are just meat for the grinder, but not me. I held my own. More than. Turns out, I've got a knack for killing demons, and I enjoy it. That made me a valuable asset. Devils don't like to lose their assets."

"To be quite honest," she continued, "I was a WHOLE lot stronger before all this. I was a Relentless Avenger, a Soul of Vengeance and an Avenging Angel. I could sprout wings from my back and fly. I could emanate an aura of menace in a thirty-\$#@-foot radius. I was as powerful as \$#@! \$#@ tenties! Whatever they did to me has made me as weak as an imp. Of course, everything I've been through in the last few days has brought me back up to speed at least to a certain degree."

"Judging by the wound, I'm guessing they already found you," said Kaedyn. He gestured to her side where there was an incredible amount of blood.

"Yeah, not far from here," she said, gesturing up to the toll house. "Gang of cultists cornered me in an abandoned toll house. I took out a couple, but I need them all dead."

"Just to be clear, are they cultists of the Absolute, or cultists of Zariel?" Kaedyn asked.

Karlach looked at him as if he'd just said something incredibly stupid. "Absolute? What the \$#@# is that? Zariel. Were you not listening? I escaped Zariel's reins on the ship, it crashed, I ran north to the road here and tried to escape towards Baldur's Gate. Got a good distance before these cultists of Zariel sprang on me out of nowhere. They were all acting like they were Tyrites. My \$#@#! Zariel contacted them via divination magic, or something, and told them to kill me. She had to 'ave. They pursued me back here. I had nowhere else to go."

"The road's been blocked for over a day now, just west of here. How'd you get back to this spot?" asked Kaedyn. He thought maybe he'd caught her in a lie.

"There's a path into some cursed land," she replied without hesitation. "Started out okay, but turned out quite bad later. The cultists jumped me there and forced me back this way along the road. I was going to try to skirt around the toll house, but when I got here, there were \$#@ Flaming Fists."

"Wait. What?" asked Ryth-Shan. During the conversation, he and the others crossed to join them. "You got here and there were already Flaming Fists here? We saw no sign of their bodies."

"Ha!" she barked at him. "Maybe you didn't see signs of their armor and weapons and such, but I'd bet you a thousand soul coins you saw their bodies. Chopped 'em to bits, those \$#@'s did. Skinned 'em alive!" Then she shifted to try to get more comfortable. She was obviously still suffering greatly from the injury.

"I came up the road just a few hours ago, heading east towards Elturel thinking I'd escape that way instead. Suddenly, there they were. They were yelling at me to put my weapons down or they'd kill me," she said. "They were blocking the road east. Apparently, some goblins had raided the \$#@ place and at least one man was dead. The others had fled to get help and brought the soldiers back, they said. They warned me not to try anything or they'd kill me. Lots of trouble on the road, they said. I tried to explain to them that I was being chased and people were trying to kill me."

"That's when they caught up to me. Next thing I knew, that blonde \$#@# was all smiling and thanking them for catching me. Said I was a butcher who killed some family including a pregnant woman, or some \$#@ like that. Said I was a vicious demon in disguise who'd escaped the Hells and they were paladins of Tyr trying to bring me to justice. Lying pricks! I'M the bloody paladin of Tyr. \$#@ \$#@ stole my @#\$ \$#@ Sword of

Justice!” She seemed about to cry. The powerful looking, tough-as-nails, devil-woman looked like she was going to break down from the emotion of it all. She was furious, not scared, especially now that she’d been so severely hurt by her sworn enemies.

“Wait!” said Kaedyn, utterly shocked and amazed. “You expect us to believe that YOU are the paladin of Tyr who owned that sword?”

“I don’t care what the @\$# you believe,” she replied. “But yes. That’s my sword. Long story. Short of it is that I was an adventurer who went to Avernus when Elturel descended. Got captured by Zariel and enslaved; forced to serve her. I’m a paladin of Tyr, so fighting evil is my thing. I go kicking @\$## during the Blood War, and all the while praying to Tyr for salvation from the \$#@ \$#@ place. There it comes, the ship. Bam! I’m outta there. Funny way for Tyr to answer my prayer, eh?”

“Anyway, the bloody soldiers believed the cultists, of course,” she continued through gritted teeth. “Well, at first anyway. They tried to take me prisoner. I... there was a fight that broke out. I wasn’t going to let them take me. I couldn’t return to the Hells. Zariel would... she would do unspeakable things to me to punish me. I ran to the east side of the building, thinking there might be a way to cut around to the river and just jump in, but there was no place to go. Stupid cliffs, and the crap they had back there blocked my way. The cultists backed me into a corner. I literally had no place to run. I had to fight them off. They swarmed me. I killed a few. Got this nasty injury and fell back.”

“I actually wouldn’t have gotten away if it hadn’t been for one of the soldiers. After they’d gutted me, I thought it was pretty much over. Then this guy stepped in front of that blonde prick. His name was Lieutenant something-or-other. They kept calling him Lieutenant one minute and Captain the next. \$#@ cultists were super pissed when he shoved them out of the way. He told them he didn’t believe that they were Tyrites. They were using powers no Tyrite would. That blonde \$#@ also carried my sword on his back, but he never used it. When they’d first jumped me on the way to Baldur’s, I lost it to him. \$#@! If I’d had it when I fought them here, maybe things would’ve turned out differently. Well, anyway, he used it, but it was just a sword to him. It didn’t glow and it didn’t aid him, and the soldier-guy noticed.”

“Anyway, the blonde guy vowed to cut the lieutenant-captain to ribbons and his entire squad. I seized the opportunity and shot one of the cultists in the head. It cleared a gap for me to run. I remember glancing over my shoulder to see that blonde prick attack the lieutenant-captain-guy who stood in his way. Then the soldiers joined in to fight with the cultists and save their leader. They forgot about me after that, at least for a bit.”

Then she became haunted. “It was like the Hells, I tell you. I crawled my way down here and have been trying to nurse my injuries since. Then, all of a sudden, I hear them screaming. They were screaming horrifically. I knew what they were doing. The \$#@ were punishing the surviving soldiers for getting in their way. They were skinning them and cutting them to pieces while they were still alive.”

Kaedyn sighed. He looked back at the others. Then he met Karlach’s eyes once more. He tried to gauge whether she was lying or not. “I can see why you’re so angry,” he said. “It’s frustrating when people think you’re evil just because of your race and appearance. I experience the same thing myself. I’m a cleric of Tyr.”

Karlach’s eyes went wide. She seemed alarmed, but then she took control of herself. “Is this the part where you try to finish me off, then - where you pass judgment on me and deem me a wicked, evil monster from the Hells?”

He smiled in response. “Were you not listening?” he said in jest. “I don’t judge a person by their race or appearance. I suffer from such prejudices myself. People suck! They get scared over certain things and immediately jump to conclusions. I’m not one of those people.”

She eyed him skeptically, but she said, “That’s at least a comfort. You seem good and all, but after everything I’ve been through, it’s hard to trust anyone.”

He nodded. “I know the feeling. Listen, I’m going to go and discuss this with my companions. I’ll look into it. I swear by everything I hold dear, we will not pass judgment on this lightly.”

She smiled. “And I swear to you by everything I hold dear that if you pass the wrong judgment on me, I’ll fight to the bloody end and take at least a few of you with me.”

He could tell she was only partially joking but mostly serious. He tried to pass it off as the former and chuckled. "Be right back." Then he turned and made his way across with his friends.

As he went, Karlach called to him. "Make 'em scream. I'd come with you, just to see them bleed, but I'm too busy bleeding myself. I'll be here when you're done."

Kaedyn saw that Ryth-Shan was eager to give his opinions on the matter as soon as they were beyond earshot. "What do you think?" he asked his gith friend.

"She seems to be telling the truth, and she's obviously one of us. That doesn't make her trustworthy, but THEY certainly aren't up there. Story checks out too. They probably defeated the new captain and his squad after she escaped. Then they tortured and flayed them just for fun; cutting them to pieces. Cultists of a demon would certainly do such things, wouldn't they?"

"Agreed," said Wynari. "I trust her word more than theirs. As crazy as it sounds, they seem completely off to me and she seems completely, well, good."

"We connected with her," said Gale. "That makes her one of the Afflicted. She's one of us. Like it or not, we may need to take her with us. Unlike these True Souls that are going around, she doesn't seem to be serving the Absolute."

"She didn't even seem to recognize it," said Kaedyn. "When I asked about the Cult of the Absolute, she looked at me like I was stupid. She had no clue about anything having to do with it. So, I'm thinking you're right. I think we're definitely dealing with cultists of Zariel, just as she said they were. THEY are most likely the ones who killed the people at the toll house, and THEY most likely took the Sword of Justice; the sword of a paladin of Tyr. So, are we helping her?"

Ryth-Shan gave him a knowing grin. "Oh, come on, Kaed. You know you want to. Here's this paladin of Tyr who actually seems to be a truly devoted paladin of Tyr, and there is a group of false Tyrites up there who have likely butchered a bunch of people, and you think we're going to say no? Besides, she's one of us and will make a powerful ally. And, on top of it all, I kinda like her." And so, the decision was made. They started their way back across the river to Karlach's little island, and they prepared to face Anders and his small band.

But as they were speaking, Cyrel, the wizard girl of the "Tyrite" group, was watching them from the veranda on the south side of the toll house. She had used her familiar to eavesdrop on their conversation. She sneered. "Anders," she called softly to him through the open door. Her face turned truly sinister. "Looks like we might have a few more victims."

Chapter 106 - Bloody Nightmare

They stood before Karlach once more. “We’re going to help you against the cultists. There are only four left. Care to join us?” Kaedyn asked.

She raised her right brow at him. “Seriously? I told you. I’d love to make ‘em scream, but I’m wounded. You really do have a listening problem, don’t you?”

“I’m a cleric. Remember? I can heal you,” said Kaedyn. “We also just found some healing potions inside the toll house there.” He pulled one out and handed it to her. “Should cure your wounds pretty quickly. Come with us, and we’ll help you against them and anyone else Zariel throws at you.”

“I could use the company, but until I’ve shaken Zariel off my back, I’d only put a target on yours,” she told him. “I was on my way to Baldur’s Gate, actually, to slaughter the #@\$\$. Until I do, I’ll never truly be free. I’ve sworn an oath to kill every last cultist of Zariel, you see. After what they did to me, I will make every last one of them pay.”

“Honestly, Karlach,” Kaedyn replied, handing her a second potion, “you can’t afford to not come with us, and I don’t think we can afford to not have you with us. You wouldn’t believe the mess we’re all in, and you are one of us; like it or not. You’ve got one of those things in your head, just like we do. Therefore, those who are after us will be coming after you as well. In reverse, I’m fairly certain Zariel is already involved with us too, and we have a cambion courting us, and I have no doubt in my mind that our fates are intertwined.” He gave her yet another potion. “If we stick together, we might just defeat this thing. There’s a lot you don’t know about the Absolute, the True Souls that follow her, etc.”

Karlach considered this. “Are you serious? So, you know what the #@\$ is going on with those worm things? Do you know how to get rid of ‘em? Been having some really tripped out dreams last few days.”

Kaedyn nodded. “Trust me. We know how you feel. I’m so sick of the dreams.”

Karlach downed a final potion and refused any additional aid. “Okay. You healed me, and we’ll fight the #@\$ together.” She seemed finally convinced that this was the best path for her.

“Come on,” said Kaedyn, and he helped her up. She grabbed her spear. “Let’s go kill us some fake Tyrite cultists of Zariel. Shall we?”

“Hells yeah!” said Karlach with a broad smile. She grabbed the rest of her gear. “I can’t wait to make those #\$\$\$ pay!”

Then her mind touched his; gratitude, warmth, and relief. Then a light, sharper than the truest blade, brighter than a star, it filled Kaedyn with awe, forcing him to his knees. And from within, a winged figure stepped forward, graceful and terrible. She placed her hand on his cheek. And she smiled as she carved her name across his chest.

Karlach growled as the vision ended. “Kwa’ad vos non petri’kar.”

“Who was that; in your memory?” he asked.

“THAT was Zariel; Fallen Lady. Defiled celestial... ruler of Avernus. I think she’s trying to warn me not to go through with this. I can’t believe you experienced it also. Bloody Hells! Are we sharing everything?”

“Not everything,” said Kaedyn, “but many things.”

“If we kill those #\$\$, she’ll send more, and worse,” Karlach warned. “Are you sure you want to do this? If you do, there’s no going back. Help me, and you paint a target on your own @#\$. Zariel will want your heads too.”

“What will you do if she sends more and we don’t help you?” asked Kaedyn.

She grinned. “Oh, I’m counting on it. I’ll be ready for her. And the first step is to go home to Baldur’s Gate. I’ve got a score to settle there. With or without you, that’s how this is going to end.”

He nodded. “Well, we’re committed. Let’s get this done.” Then they made their way back up to the main entrance of the toll house.

All was quiet; a little TOO quiet. Then Ander’s voice came from inside. “I don’t know what she told you, but you’ve picked the wrong side. She’ll join you in the Hells when we’re finished here!” And with that, a necrotic spell of some sorts filled the air. It was Cyrel, the mage. She was on the roof of the building, barely visible. Dark,

sickly energy buzzed around them and into the bodies of the dead. All at once, zombies lifted into the air. The entire area around the toll house came to life; filled with undead.

Kaedyndyn immediately turned the undead. Two gnoll zombies instantly turned and fled. Two remained, unphased. Three zombies of former caravan members returned to the earth, the magic disrupted, but one human zombie also remained unaffected. Kaedyndyn then cast Shield of Faith on Karlach, guessing that the cultists would target her most. Finally, he charged at one of the gnoll zombies to get its attention. It was the biggest gnoll that Rurik, the dwarf “Tyrte” had said he’d killed. He partially targeted this one so that he would position himself in such a way that the two frightened gnoll zombies would flee towards the open road to the west. This they did. Then the main gnoll zombie attacked the cleric of Tyr with two savage swipes. Only one connected. Its claws managed to rake him across the left arm, but it wasn’t enough for him to lose his concentration.

Anders and Rurik then appeared and charged at Karlach. They had been hiding behind a boulder and were quickly in range to strike. Anders cast Shield of Faith, and he attacked with a masterwork warhammer and shield. Both times he swung, Karlach managed to dive side to side, and so his hammer only bounced off the divine glow of Kaedyndyn’s Shield of Faith spell. As for Rurik, he managed to graze her on the right thigh with one of his daggers after slashing at her three times.

Gale decided to attack Cyrel. He figured he’d take out the necromancer before she could do any additional necrotic spells. There were plenty of undead in the area, and if she continued to summon more, things could go from bad to much worse. He wasn’t sure, after all, how powerful of a spellcaster she really was. Therefore, he cast Ray of Sickness, hoping his robes would help increase his power enough to take her down. Cyrel recognized that he was attacking her, and she tried to dive away. Gale almost launched the spell in the wrong direction, but he corrected his aim just in time. The ray hit her hard, and as she rolled to her feet, she seemed more than a little in pain.

Wynari also thought it best to kill Cyrel. She moved to stand almost directly below the woman, within about thirty feet of her. Then she cast Thorn Whip to yank her down from the rooftop. As Cyrel rolled to her feet, Wynari’s vine wrapped around her left ankle. There was a swift jolt as the druid yanked, and the evil mage came tumbling off the roof, dropping twenty feet to the hard pavement.

Karlach retaliated. She didn’t say anything. There was no need to. Her expression told her enemies exactly what she was thinking and feeling. She focused first on Rurik with her longsword in both hands. The tip of the blade slashed his chest, but it was a minor injury at best. Then she attacked a second time with a similar result.

As this was happening, the second gnoll zombie came at Kaedyndyn, but its claws only scraped his new armor as he dove and spun out of its way. The human zombie then tried to attack him, and it smacked him in the side of the head as hard as it could. It was like a hammer blow, and a spray of blood showered the ground. He was hurting, but miraculously he kept his concentration. Karlach was still shielded by his spell.

Ryth-Shan used Hunter’s Mark on Cyrel as she fell. He pulled out Nature’s Snare, and he attacked her with two swift jabs before she even had a chance to recover. The first was to the gut, and she curled up in a ball as a result. The second was with the head of the staff. He cracked her skull open and ended her life even as vines sprang out of the staff and engulfed her.

That was when Trynn appeared up on the rooftop. She fired at Karlach and hit, reloaded and fired again. Her second shot missed, however, landing at Karlach’s feet. The halfling only carried a short bow, so it did little more than bounce off the armor on Karlach’s forearm.

Kaedyndyn whipped out a greater healing potion and guzzled it down. As he did, Anders attacked Karlach again, hitting with his first attack but missing with the second. Once again, Karlach endured, and though it had been painful, it hardly slowed the powerful tiefling. But then, the more powerful gnoll zombie attacked Kaedyndyn, slashing him with its right claws. He screamed as the claws managed to penetrate his armor on his right side. This time, he couldn’t maintain his concentration. Shield of Faith fell. Karlach was more exposed.

Rurik attacked Karlach in unison with Anders. Three swift jabs of his daggers tried to punch holes in her. However, he only managed to connect with the last one. As Shield of Faith dropped, the dwarf’s blade stuck the paladin in the leg. It wasn’t deep, but it had breached her armor.

Gale knew Kaedyn was in trouble and decided to help him next. He once again used his Will-o' strategy. Will-o' positioned herself so that she could use Dragon's Breath on the cleric's adversaries. She used fire and gave a fierce cat scream as she lit the three up. Two of the zombies, one being the biggest gnoll, managed to shield themselves in time, but the other gnoll zombie took the flames to the face.

At the same time, Gale ran into position to catch them in a crossfire, and he cast Lightning Bolt. There was a bright flash, and all three zombies had a jolt of powerful electricity pass through them. The human zombie flew to the ground, lightning spraying across its chest. It did not rise again.

Wynari pulled out her scimitar and then cast Flame Blade. So, she had her Poisoned Scimitar in her right hand and a flaming blade in her offhand. As she did this, she ran up to the lesser of the two gnoll zombies and attacked. The zombie tried to dodge, but her flaming scimitar lodged into its skull. She then violently tore it free. It didn't fall, but it was certainly staggering.

As Rurik stabbed Karlach, he left himself open. She seized the opportunity and sliced him across the belly. Rurik staggered, leaving himself even more wide open, and a moment later, she rammed the tip of her blade through his face. Seeing Anders coming at her from behind, she spun around her victim, tore the longsword free, and turned to face him. As she did this, he managed to connect with his warhammer, striking her in the backplate. It severely dented the plated armor, and it hurt like the flames of Avernus, but once again she endured. She dropped into a defensive stance as she faced him. It was time to finally battle the cultists' leader; one-on-one.

"Curse you!" Anders cried, breathing heavily. "You BLOODY FIEND!" he roared angrily as she deflected a second attack with her blade.

"You'll be joining Zariel real soon, %#@!" she retorted.

Meanwhile, the lesser gnoll zombie attacked Wynari, but she deflected with her poisoned blade. Ryth-Shan then reapplied Hunter's Mark on the greater zombie as he ran up with Nature's Snare. He hit it hard, but it succeeded in escaping the ensnaring effects of the staff. Trynn fired again at Karlach, but she missed twice. Her timing was all off, and at the time Rurik was still alive. The dwarf and Anders were too close to Karlach to get a clear shot.

Kaedyn dove and spun, trying to avoid the zombies. As he did, he drank another greater healing potion. If he could just stay on his feet and keep the brainless monstrosities busy, maybe his companions could destroy them. Then, as if in reply, the greater zombie slashed him once more in the side. He growled painfully as the effects of the potion surged through him. He just needed to stay on his feet. He just needed to stay on his feet!

Will-o' breathed fire again. Gale cast Fire Bolt. Wynari attacked with her scimitars. At last, the lesser of the two zombies burst into flames and fell screaming. It had taken the cat's attack in the chest, Gale's to the left leg, which dropped it to its knees, and Wynari successfully stabbed it through the throat with her Poisoned Scimitar and Flame Blade.

Karlach flew at Anders with all the furious rage she had saved up for that moment. Her first attack tore his right pauldron off, but her second bounced off his shield. As that was happening, Ryth-Shan struck the zombie in the side of the face. He then followed up with a quick jab towards the knee, but the undead construct shifted its weight just in time. A moment later, however, vines from the first blow ensnared it. In moments, the creature was on its knees before them, fighting to escape.

Trynn saw that Anders was not winning, and she fired again at Karlach. She cursed. He was too close. She still couldn't get a good shot. Her first arrow pegged a stone behind her. She reloaded and took aim again. Finally, the moment came. She fired. "Yes!" she hissed. The arrow stuck in Karlach's left shoulder. The paladin of Tyr was hurting, but she was still furiously standing her ground.

Then Anders thought her injury would slow her. He came at her with two swift swipes, but Karlach's defenses were superior. She batted his hammer away both times as if she was swatting flies. "Die! Die! Die!" he screamed. He was growing very nervous. It wasn't looking good for him and his cultists.

Kaedyn risked an attack against the ensnared zombie since it was the only one left and it was entangled in vines. The blade punched into the monster's chest and all the way out its back, but it still did not fall. Then it broke free, the vines falling away, and it came at him too quickly with its snarling teeth. He stumbled. The teeth came down, and they effectively clamped onto his left shoulder. With a sickening crunch, everyone heard the armor, like a

crushed tin can, crumple under the intense pressure. Kaedyn couldn't even scream, and the pain was so intense that he lost consciousness. He started to crumple to the ground, but the undead beast opened its jaws and clamped down a second time, just for good measure. Will-o' breathed fire again, even as he fell, and Gale used Fire Bolt. Combined with Kaedyn's sword still sticking out of it, the zombie finally gave up the ghost. It was engulfed in flames. The smell of burnt, rotting gnoll flesh assailed them.

Wynari then saved Kaedyn by casting Cure Wounds. Then she charged at Anders as if healing Kaedyn had been a hiccup. Anders spotted her, which distracted him for a moment. This gave Karlach the advantage she needed. She jabbed, piercing his right breast. He lost concentration, and his Shield of Faith fell. As it did, Ryth-Shan pulled out his bow, and fired. Anders didn't even have a chance to say another word. The arrow shot through his neck from his left, passed through, and continued on into the distance.

But like Wynari, the gith didn't even give pause. He turned, reloaded and fired at Trynn next. The halfling took it in the hip. She panicked and fled as she pulled the missile out. She then darted over the top of the roof towards the back of the building.

"She's getting away!" cried Karlach. "Oh NO YOU DON'T! LITTLE \$#@\$!"

Kaedyn recovered but wasn't able to do much. He just stood up and tried to take in the situation. Gale and Will-o' dashed into the toll house to pursue the escaping halfling. Wynari did the same. Karlach saw them head into the building, saw Kaedyn and Ryth-Shan at the front still, and she darted around to the side in hopes of cutting Trynn off. Ryth-Shan commanded Zriek to hover over her to let everyone know where she was, and he took off after Karlach. "My raven will hover over her," he told the paladin.

Karlach grinned sadistically. "Good to know."

Trynn dashed off the building and down the stairs, heading for the river. Kaedyn saw Zriek continue towards the back of the building, and he decided to follow Ryth-Shan and Karlach. On his way, however, he grabbed the Sword of Justice off of Anders. In his mind, it was too valuable to even possibly allow some random thief to steal it. Gale rushed through the building with his familiar, bursting out onto the veranda just in time to see Trynn darting down the stairs. "She's over here!" he cried. "Down the stairs!"

Wynari came up just behind. "Ziva, get her," she hissed. The flying snake then uncoiled from her belt and flew at her target. She landed on Trynn's back and bit her.

"Son of a...!" cried Trynn in a hysterical panic after she screamed in pain. Ziva's poison was already threatening to shut her down. She reached back and batted the snake away as Karlach suddenly hopped over and dropped down onto the stairs in front of her, blocking her escape. Trynn screamed again as Ryth-Shan came to the top of the ridge above the stairs. He saw the halfling drop into a fetal position as Karlach hovered over her. "Please don't kill me! Please! Spare me!" she squealed.

Karlach's face was full of disgust. "Did you spare those soldiers? Do you standardly spare ANYONE who begs for mercy from you? No! You wretched, disgusting, putrid, little @\$#! When those soldiers pleaded and begged you to stop, did you? No!" She was screaming up close in the halfling's face. "NO! You butchered them. You tortured them to death. I heard you SKIN the lieutenant alive as he begged you over and over again to at least spare the rest of his men. And did you? NOOOoooo!" She growled the last word as her entire head shook with rage.

Trynn stared up at her in absolute terror. "I... I..." She could no longer speak. She urinated instead all over the stairs.

"You might want to turn your heads and cover your ears," said Karlach to her new companions. "I promise this is going to be an absolute, bloody nightmare. I only hope that what I do to you, halfling, I'm able to do to your companions and superiors. I hope they aren't dead, because I'm going to do to you and them even more than you did to every single person you BUTCHERED!"

Then she followed through as Kaedyn and the others turned away in disbelief. Words could not describe the things Karlach did to Trynn. In fact, the others, even Wynari in her colder state, could not remain in the area. They had to hurry away to escape the sounds of Trynn's agonizing screams. Then Karlach appeared at the entrance of the toll house. She did just as she said she would to Trynn. She checked Rurik, Cyrel and Anders to see if they were alive. They were not, and she cursed violently.

Kaedyn and the others approached her cautiously. Her vicious butchery had shaken them up. Did they really want her to come with them? Never in their lives had they witnessed such a horrendous event. Was she really a devil? Had they made the right choice?

But then they saw her shaking like a leaf. Tears were in her eyes. She met Kaedyn's gaze. "It... It is done," she said. "The halfling, at least, paid in full." She then looked down at Anders' corpse. "I only wish HE had been the one. HE was their leader. May Zariel do worse to him. She most likely will, and that is my only consolation."

"You weren't kidding," said Kaedyn as he blinked rapidly at her. "You are definitely a force to be reckoned with. I..."

"If you can't handle what I just did," she told him somberly, "then we're done here. Sorry, but that is the way of it. These \$\$\$@ deserve everything they received and more. I would think a fellow Tyrite would agree."

Kaedyn nodded. "No. Don't get me wrong. What they did to the soldiers here, and what they did to many others, I'm sure, they deserved what you did and more; like you said. It's just... that must take incredible strength. I'm utterly stunned by the sheer amount of... of strength of will you have. I don't even know how else to say it."

"You did what had to be done," said Wynari. "Better you than me, I will admit. I am done with this place, however. Can we get out of here? Our mission is accomplished. There is no safe way east along Risen Road. We now know our only road."

"Well," said Gale, "technically we now know of multiple roads. She took the path to the cursed land. We COULD go that way, it sounds like, to escape this area. Hopefully the gith aren't that way, since she didn't see them. So, we could go that way or the Underdark. We might also find another way. Remember, Lae'zel found a path to that githyanki creche somewhere beyond the mountain pass. It might provide another passage."

"But we're trying to avoid my people," said Ryth-Shan. "I think that way is not an option."

"Agreed," said Kaedyn.

"Hey," said Gale. "I was just trying to make sure I stated all of our potential options. Best to consider everything, just in case."

"Whatever," said Wynari. "Let's move and rejoin the others at the goblin camp. This place is..."

Karlach nodded as she wiped blood off of herself. "Just plain nasty," she finished for her.

And with that, they looted the cultists, took their best equipment and left. As they went, Kaedyn handed the Sword of Justice to Karlach. She thanked him and then ditched her plain longsword. "This one is much better," she said with a smile. "It's nice to have my old blade back. I can cast Shield of Faith with it. It definitely comes in handy since I can't use a shield when I'm wielding it."

"We're going to need all the help we can get," said Ryth-Shan. "Glad it's now in your hands once more."

"Agreed," said Karlach. "Better than those \$\$\$ hands." Then the party took a quick rest, mended themselves and their armor, and they made their way towards the goblin camp.